PHIL BRADLEY AT THE WHEEL

SILAS K. BOONE

To
Arthur Malcolm Clay
From
Grandma.
June 3 - 1925

PHIL WAS AT THE WHEEL AND ETHAN SAT BESIDE HIM

Phil Bradley at the Wheel;

or,

The Mountain Boys' Mad Auto Dash

BY

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PHIL BRADLEY AT THE WHEEL

CHAPTER I

FOUR BOYS ON A RAIL FENCE

FOUR well-grown lads, one of whom was abnormally stout, sat perched on a rail fence, and munched fall apples that had probably dropped from a tree overlapping the dusty country road.

They looked as though they might have been on a long tramp; for the heavy-weight was alternately mopping his glowing face with a big red bandana, and between puffs biting at his apple.

"Well, anyhow, I'm glad we had that downgrade instead of climbing up, fellows," he remarked, reflectively, as he eyed the long winding slope they had evidently just descended.

"Listen to Lub getting cold feet, will you?" exclaimed a rather slab-sided, lanky boy, who

somehow had a little of the Yankee in his looks and manner of speech, and whose name was in truth Ethan Allan.

"You're wrong there, Ethan," observed still another of the quartette; "he's only shaking hands with himself. Lub knows a good thing when he sees it."

"He does when he happens to be looking your way, X-Ray Tyson," chuckled the said Lub, joyously.

"All the same," ventured the fourth lad, who seemed to be regarded as a sort of leader among his chums, "we've had a dandy five mile tramp this October day; and I've enjoyed it more than I can tell you."

"Because you're built for walking, Phil; every one in the bunch is but me. Guess I was only intended for a good sitter."

Just then, as luck would have it, the treacherous top rail of the fence chose to give way under the weight of Lub, dropping him in a sprawling heap to the ground.

His three chums, of course, being boys, were greatly amused, as their loud laughter testified. Apparently it took considerable to ruffle the good-natured fat boy's temper, for sprawling there like a great toad he continued to bite at his apple and smile serenely.

"Pride goes before a fall, Lub, you know," jeered Ethan.

"Honest to goodness!" declared the boy given the queer nick-name of X-Ray, "when he landed the earth trembled. If it had been over there in Messina, where they had that awful shake, the people would be rushing out of their houses like everything."

"Change the subject, fellows," remarked Phil Bradley, as he always did when he found that any one was being "picked on" too heavily. "Is it settled then, that we go up-country after those hickory nuts to-morrow?"

"Oh! I'm in favor of the run, if the rest are," asserted X-Ray, who to let the reader into a secret had come by his name through the fact that he was considered unusually quick and sharp, so that nothing was hidden from him long; so his name being Raymond Tyson had gradually assumed its present character.

"And it's a mighty worthy cause, too," added Lub, between bites. "Mrs. Jones, the matron at the orphan asylum, says the kiddies certainly do enjoy cracking the shellbarks in the winter time, and getting out the goodies."

"Yes," added Ethan, maliciously, still with an eye on poor Lub, "and what's recently happened had given me a bright idea, so that we

won't have near so much trouble as we generally do, shinning up the trees, and knocking the nuts down."

"What's that, Ethan?" asked Phil, quickly, but knowing very well from the tone of the practical joker that he had some amusing scheme to propose.

"Why, you know they often coax chestnuts to drop by taking a big rock and pounding the trunk of the tree," the other continued; "and all we've got to do is to influence our friend Lub here to climb up, and keep dropping off the lower limbs. You see he'll shake the ground, and rattle the nuts down *beau*tifully!"

"Sure thing!" commented Lub, complacently.

"Then you'll have to bring a derrick along, Ethan, to hoist him up so often, for he'd never make the riffle himself," chuckled X-Ray Tyson.

While the four chums continue to sit there, resting after their walk, it might be just as well to pick up a little more information concerning them. This for the benefit of those readers who did not have the good fortune to enjoy the first volume of this series.

Their home town was known as Brewster. It lay snuggled among the hills of New York State, and from this fact Phil Bradley and his

three chums had chosen to call themselves the "Mountain Boys," possibly after the famous heroes of Revolutionary fame up in the Green Mountain State.

Phil was an orphan, and had been left a very large estate, so that the lack of money never bothered him. Lub, too, had a rich aunt, who took delight in catering to his many wants; while X-Ray's folks were also well-to-do.

Only Ethan lacked means, as his people were in moderate circumstances. His trio of mates would have gladly borne his share of the expense attending their numerous little trips and camping experiences, but Ethan was too proud a chap to accept charity.

He being an ingenious boy had set out to make money on his own hook, in a great variety of ways that were really a credit to the boy. By accident he came across a pamphlet that told all about the value of certain medicinal roots, such as ginseng which is extensively used by the Chinese, and brings quite a few dollars a pound when properly dried.

So Ethan began to prowl all around the neighboring country, and in this way actually discovered a number of patches of wild ginseng, as well as golden seal, and other plants that were worth while.

He put in all his spare time digging and drying these roots. His chums professed to take more or less interest in the matter; at least Phil gave him the address of a man in New York City who might buy the accumulation from Ethan.

Never had a boy received such wonderful returns for labor spent. Why, the dealer in hides and ginseng roots wrote that Ethan's stock was extra fine, and commanded gilt-edge prices, which he took pleasure in enclosing, and eagerly asked for a continuation of the shipments.

Ethan was very proud of that letter. He often showed it to his chums, who complimented him gravely on his success. Ethan, despite his Yankee ancestry, for his people had once been whalers, somehow failed to discover the mysterious winks and side grins that were exchanged between the others on such occasions.

The fact of the matter was that a fine little conspiracy had been hatched up between the other three fellows. It was all done through an earnest desire to help their chum accumulate enough coin to enable him to pay his part of the expense and feel independent.

The magnanimous dealer never existed at all. He was in truth a rich bachelor uncle of Phil's, a man who loved boys, and entered heart and

soul into the little scheme to hoodwink the proud and ambitious Ethan. No doubt the roots sent in were all right but they would never have fetched one-fifth that price if they had fallen into the hands of an ordinary everyday dealer.

So far Ethan did not suspect, and the others were doing their best to keep him from "tumbling to their little game," as X-Ray Tyson always termed it.

Recently they had been having a glorious time of it farther up in the Adirondacks, where it chanced Phil owned a large tract of land, and on which they had found a birch bark shanty already built. What a medley of wonderful adventures had come trooping across their path amidst those solitudes—well, we must refer the reader to the preceding book for particulars, since enough others are awaiting their turn to occupy our entire attention just now.

X-Ray was not very strong physically, and his folks wanted him to be in the open air as much as possible. He had grown so fast that his lungs needed expanding; though for that matter his chums always found him equal to any task they set him, and he was a bundle of nerves in the bargain.

Lub had another name, of course, and it was a very good one. At home and with his teach-

ers at school he was known as Osmond; but of course that fact was lost sight of among his boy friends, who for years past had always addressed him as Lub Fenwick. There need be no explanation given save that as he was exceedingly heavy he usually stumbled a good bit, and was reckoned "lubberly."

There was never a boy around Brewster who was so well beloved as Lub. His sunny disposition drew every one to him. Even those who may have felt disposed to show themselves at enmity with Phil and X-Ray Tyson and Ethan Allan drew the line when it came to thinking of injuring portly Lub. They found no malice in their hearts toward him.

Ethan and X-Ray often "joshed" their stout chum, though at times they felt rather ashamed of having played some trick on the confiding Lub. As one of them confessed in contrition, it was too much like "taking candy from the baby."

And yet there was no brighter scholar in school than this same Lub; as a rule he stood at or near the head of all his classes.

School was a subject of considerable talk in Brewster just at that time of year, and for a good reason—the vacation season for once had been extended to unknown lengths! Some

said that after New Year's there might be a call for the scholars to assemble; but meanwhile each parent was supposed to do all that was possible to have the boys and girls study at home.

Just as the fall term was about to begin an epidemic had broken out in town, and the wise school board immediately took the alarm. It was reckoned dangerous for the young people to gather, as they must if the schools were opened; and so the whole community faced another three months' vacation.

Parents groaned, and wondered how they could stand it; but there were few tears shed among the boys of Brewster. In fact, they confessed on the sly that epidemics might have their uses after all; and that there were few clouds but had a silver lining.

It may be easily understood how Phil and his chums laid wonderful plans for enjoying this unexpected vacation. Already they had mapped out several jaunts that up to then had been only vague dreams, with several of the quartette at least; and concerning which more will be said later on.

All of them were getting well rested after some little time spent there at the foot of the decline. When Phil mentioned the fact that he

guessed they had better be going only Lub groaned.

"Some of you will have to give me a hand, then, or I'll never get up from this comfortable seat," he told them.

"Who's the man just passed in that wagon, with the little boy on the seat?" asked Ethan. "There, he's jumped off, leaving his wagon in the middle of the road, and run into that yard, with an empty basket in his hand. Seems like I've seen him somewhere or other."

"Oh! that's Jim Scraggs, and his little grandson Toby," replied X-Ray Tyson, quickly, before any one else could speak. "You know he goes around the country buying up eggs from the farmers' wives. He pays a small sum for the same, and hands 'em over to some big company that's got a cold storage plant down in New York. Next February the same eggs he gets for twelve cents will bring fifty."

"All sorts of ways of making a living, ain't there?" Ethan went on to remark, with a satisfied smirk on his face, which caused some of the others to exchange winks; for they knew very well he must be shaking hands with himself just then over his ability to pull down the dollars so easily: and was pitying poor Jim

Scraggs, who had to cover so much territory in a day to make a bare living.

"Hurry, everybody," Phil continued; then, in a startled way added: "What's that racket up the hill?"

"Sounds like an auto horn blowing like fun!" exclaimed X-Ray Tyson, hastily.

"You just bet it is, and I wouldn't wonder—oh! great guns, look at that!" and Ethan pointed a trembling finger upwards along the road.

"I saw it!" shrilled Lub, who had in the excitement managed to scramble as far as his knees; "and it's running away like hot cakes!"

Phil took one look.

He saw that the egg-buyer's old wagon occupied pretty much all of the rather narrow road. If a motor car had really gotten beyond the control of the driver, and was plunging at a furious pace down the hill, it must of necessity smash straight into the rig standing there.

The horse had scented danger and was beginning to show symptoms of nervousness; but even if he did turn aside the vehicle would still remain in the path of the oncoming car.

And there on the seat was that little figure of old Jim Scraggs' grandson, a boy of about six years of age, utterly unconscious of his deadly peril.

CHAPTER II

THE CAR IN THE CRANBERRY BOG

"OH! the boy!" gasped tenderhearted Lub.

By the time he had managed to get on his feet he was alone. The other three had dashed headlong in the direction of the spot where the wagon of the old egg collector stood before the gate of the farm house.

Phil was in the lead, for he had taken the first start; but both X-Ray and Ethan Allan were close at his heels. All of them seemed animated by just one purpose, which was to reach the imperiled vehicle before the runaway touring car that was plunging down the grade brought about a terrible catastrophe.

Over his shoulder Phil saw that he had backing. That was why he shouted as he did; and the others were somehow so accustomed to having Phil assume the command that they just naturally did what he told them.

"Snatch the child out, and get him away, fellows! I'll try and steer the horse into the fence!"

"All right, Phil!" snapped X-Ray, always able to give an answer, no matter how winded he might be at the time.

All of them wisely chose to run up alongside the wagon on the safe side, which of course must be the one nearer the fence. X-Ray made a flying leap upwards, and snatching the startled boy from the seat actually threw him into the arms of Ethan, who had no sooner clasped his arms around the kicking lad than he darted through the convenient gate so as to be out of harm's way.

Phil had clutched the bridle close to the bits, and was dragging horse and vehicle in closer to the fence. The animal struggled, and tried to have his head; but Phil had a firm grip and would not allow him to have his way about it.

As for X-Ray, finding that he would not have time to even jump, he crouched there in the bed of the wagon, shrinking as far as he could toward the off-side.

The runaway car was now shooting toward them like a descending comet. They could see that it contained but a single person, a man who gripped the wheel, and was only intent on keeping it as near the middle of the road as he could.

He was as white as a sheet, Phil noticed,

and looked badly frightened, as indeed who would not have been under similar conditions?

It whirled past in a cloud of dust, just missing connections with the outer rear wheel of the egg man's old wagon. Had it struck there it would have been what Ethan would have called a "fine omelette or a mess of scrambled eggs," for several crates of "hen fruit" had already been gathered by Jim Scraggs on his weekly round.

But as the boys say, "a miss is as good as a mile," and no damage was done, at least to the wagon or its contents.

The big touring car had already vanished, and the boys wondered whether the driver would be able to control it, or meet with a disaster sooner or later, when perhaps he overtook some hay wagon that filled the road.

There was poor old Jim Scraggs coming from the farm house, and with his legs weak under him, for his heart had, figuratively speaking, been up in his throat with terror. When he discovered Ethan setting little Toby down on the ground, and realized that these wide-awake boys had done the handsome thing by him, it was really pitiable to see how the old man broke down and actually "blubbered like a baby," as Ethan said; though Phil thought he

had detected a suspicious moisture in the eyes of the speaker also.

"That's a lesson to me, I tell you, boys," the old man said again and again, as he went from one to the other, shaking hands, not even omitting the tardy Lub; "I'll never leave my hoss standin' out in the road agin, and 'specially when little Toby he's along. He might have been killed; and I got over twenty dozen fresh eggs in them crates too, boys. I'll never forgit what ye done for me, never!"

"Let's push on, and see what happened to the man in the runaway car," proposed Phil, who never liked to be thanked for doing what he considered his duty.

"Think he could stop her, now he's down the grade, and with level ground ahead of him?" asked X-Ray Tyson, as they started off.

"That's what none of us can say," Ethan told him; "it depends on whether it's only the brake that gave out, or if some part of the engine's taken a notion to jam, so he can't shut the power off. But we'll know before long, I reckon."

"Maybe he wasn't scared, though?" chuckled X-Ray.

"I never want to see anybody look worse than he did," Lub affirmed. "You see, I didn't

have even a chance to get across the road, so I scrooged into a fence corner where the rails locked. Whew! came close enough to me so I could feel the wind, and swallowed a peck of dust in the bargain. If he ever hits a tree going like that I pity his car."

"Better think what'll happen to the driver!" exploded Ethan.

"Oh! we know he'll be flattened out like a pancake!" X-Ray added, complacently; because it happened that the man was an utter stranger to them, which made a difference.

"I don't see anything of the car ahead," Phil remarked; "and there's a bad bend you know, just beyond the little bridge over the creek."

"If he's ever been over this road before," observed Ethan, "he'll never have the nerve to try and navigate around that sharp curve going licketty-split like he was doing."

"Well, tell me how he could help it?" inquired Lub, seeking information.

"Phil, what do you think?" asked Ethan; for when a question arose that bothered him he always saddled the responsibility of an answer on Phil.

"All I can say is this," he was told; "if it was me, and I knew the engine had taken the

bit in its teeth, so to say, I'd turn the car into the marsh, and take my chances there. It'd be stopped anyhow, and not badly injured."

"Shucks! I bet you that's just what the man did, too," exclaimed X-Ray.

"Here you can see the tracks of the tires, still," advised Phil.

"They run pretty wobbling, as if he was beginning to lose his grit," commented Ethan, who had studied the science of tracking to some extent, and prided himself on his knowledge of woodcraft.

"Listen! isn't that some one shouting?" asked Phil.

"It sure is, and over here on the left too, where we know the mud lies good and deep and oozy!" replied one of his companions, with a half suppressed chuckle, as if he rather suspected they were about to enjoy a comical sight shortly.

"There he is!" cried Lub, suddenly.

The four boys hurried forward, and were soon standing on the roadside at a point where the marsh spread out with its treacherous surface betraying nothing of the mud depths lying below. In places farther off it was said that cranberries could be found growing on the ground, and people had even been known to

make quite a little money picking them; but of course that was too slow a way of attaining riches to ever appeal to such a lucky fellow as Ethan Allan.

The car was there, partly turned over, and half submerged in the mud. It would require considerable of a pull to get that heavy machine safely landed on the hard road again; and the expenditure of a lot of cash besides.

Just beyond, the man was wading through the slime, and heading for the shore, a sight to make anybody laugh, and hence it was not strange that Phil and his three boy chums felt unable to keep from snickering aloud.

The soft mud had plastered over his face, and every inch of his person; indeed, it was very likely that he had taken a flying leap at the time the car swerved into the marsh, and made a headlong dive into the muck.

As he straggled toward them he was digging the stuff as well as he could out of his eyes and ears, and spitting great "gobs" of it, as Ethan said, from his mouth.

When they saw his deplorable condition none of the boys wondered any longer why his calls for help had sounded so muffled. It was a wonder he had been able to do any shouting at all.

Presently he arrived at the roadside. None of the boys had felt like wading in to guide him to a haven of safety; but Phil did hold out a helping hand, so as to assist him to clamber out.

Then, having secured splinters of wood that lay under a tree struck by lightning during the preceding summer, they started to scrape some of the surplus accumulation of mud from his clothes.

The man, as soon as he could speak half-way decent, began to say some pretty hard things. Phil, however, immediately took him to task.

"It seems to me, Mister," he told him, "you ought to be thankful it isn't any worse. If you'd tried to negotiate that bend beyond, the chances are you'd have smashed into a tree or a rock, and your car would be knocked to flinders. What would have happened to you is easy to guess."

"Yes," added X-Ray, who disliked to hear any one use strong language; "right now you'd either be harping on your golden harp, or else helping keep the fires going. Mud isn't so very nice, I admit, sir, but there are worse things. And you can get your suit easy cleaned, all right."

"Thank you, boys, for setting me straight,"

the man hastened to say, as though feeling ashamed of having given way to his feelings; "I guess I *have* something to be thankful for, as you say. How far away am I from Brewster, may I ask?"

"Not much over a mile and a half," Phil told him.

"And I suppose I could get men, and a strong car to come and pull me out of this mud hole?" suggested the man.

"Yes, the liveryman, Mr. Clark, would do all that," Ethan told him. "You're not the first one he's dragged out of this mud by a long shot. But did you know about that bend, Mister, and run in here apurpose?"

"I saw that it looked serious ahead there, and expected this would be a good way to stop the car," the chauffeur explained. "I think the engine is broken now; but I saved the car, and perhaps my own neck by taking the risk. It was a bright idea, and just flashed into my mind like an inspiration. But would you mind if I walked along with you to town? When this mud dries it won't look so very bad."

"Oh! we don't care about that, sir," Phil assured him; "so come right along."

"Seems to me I saw you doing something with that horse and wagon as I came down by

the foot of the hill?" remarked the stranger, presently.

"Well," remarked Ethan, soberly, "if Phil Bradley here hadn't been as quick to jump as he did, you'd have smashed straight into that rig. It'd have ended your runaway dash all right; but think of the little boy who was sitting on the seat of that wagon; what would have happened to Toby Scraggs?"

"Was it as bad as that?" said the chauffeur, drawing a long breath; "then it seems as if a lot of us were under heavy obligations to you boys."

"Please don't mention it, Mister," said X-Ray.

Even Lub strode along as briskly as though such a thing as weariness of the flesh were utterly unknown to him; and so they soon came to the outskirts of the home town.

The owner of the stranded car was directed to Clark's livery-stable, while the boys continued on their way homeward.

"Isn't it queer," remarked Lub, before they separated, "that nowadays it seems like the Mountain Boys couldn't even take an ordinary hike over the hills without running smack into an adventure of some sort."

"Are you referring to that runaway car,

Lub, or the broken fence rail?" asked Ethan.

"It certainly was exciting enough while it lasted," admitted X-Ray Tyson; "and I want to compliment you, Ethan, on the way you caught that cub. I've seen you take the pigskin on the gridiron that way when it was whipped to you; but a good-sized boy's a different matter. And you knew how to get through that open gate in record time, too, didn't you?"

"Well," explained the other, in his drawling way, "you see, I was afraid that if the car hit the rear wheel of the wagon it would throw the whole business over on me; and I didn't feel like being splashed with a thousand eggs."

"Then it's settled that we start to-morrow at eight, is it?" demanded Lub.

"Yes," replied Phil, "I'll pick you all up; and be sure to have each a couple of gunnysacks; because, from what I've been told, the nuts are as thick as anything up there where I'm going to take you, both hickories and walnuts as well, with some big chestnut trees to boot."

"And another thing," advised Lub; "don't forget that we're likely to be away the whole day. That means we've got to fetch some lunch along."

"Trust Lub for thinking about that," jeered

Ethan; which thrust was hardly fair, for when it came to disposing of any amount of "grub" both Ethan and X-Ray were always ready to do their share of the salvage act.

"All the same don't forget that we will get furiously hungry gathering nuts," Phil advised; "and fetch enough with you. I've known fellows to want to tackle the lunch by ten o'clock in the morning."

"You don't think it'll snow, do you, Phil?" asked X-Ray, with a grin.

"It's easy to guess why he asks that foolish question," remarked Ethan; "ever since he got that pair of Canada snow-shoes for his birthday last spring, he's been hugging himself with the idea that he's learned how to use the same, and he's waiting for a chance to show us all what an expert he is."

"Well, it might happen," said Phil, mysteriously, "that before school takes up again X-Ray may have the chance he wants, and in a country where snow-shoes are as necessary in winter as mittens. Don't ask me any more now, because I won't tell you a single thing. Be ready before eight, everybody; that's the last word!"

Saying which, Phil turned and hurried off, leaving his three chums to stare at each other,

with wrinkled brows, as though they could not for the life of them imagine what that vague promise might cover.

"He's got something up his sleeve, all right," ventured Ethan; "besides that run down along the coast to North Carolina, where Phil has a little game preserve; but we'll know it all in good time. So-long, fellows, see you in the morning!"

CHAPTER III

A TRAMP BY THE NAME OF BRIGGS

ABOUT half-past eight on the following morning a car containing the four lads whose acquaintance we have made might have been seen spinning along a road many miles distant from the town of Brewster.

Phil was at the wheel, and Ethan sat beside him, while the other two lolled in the spacious seat behind. It is needless to say that plenty of space just suited Lub's idea of comfort, for as a rule he disliked very much to be cramped.

The day was a bracing, frosty one, but if X-Ray Tyson had had the fainest hope of seeing a foot of snow on the ground—which of course he did not so early in the season—he knew he was doomed to bitter disappointment the minute he opened his eyes, when called to breakfast.

Autumn was well along now. The myriads of forest trees had turned to golden yellow and a bright scarlet, with many shades of soft brown between. And even boys may feel something of delight mingled with awe when

gazing at the glorious landscape painted by the deft fingers of Jack Frost.

A dozen times had Lub announced that it was a "lovely day," and the others agreed with him, for no one made the slightest dissent. Their eyes were everywhere, and nothing escaped them, it seemed.

"Where did you get on the track of this grove of nut trees up this way, Phil?" X-Ray was asking, as they climbed another hill, the engine behaving grandly, for it was of a good make, and Phil knew how to manage so as to get the best there was in his motor.

"Just by accident," the driver replied. "In fact, it came about through old Doc Whittaker."

"Say, that's queer," observed Ethan; "what would he know about hickory nuts? He may be the best doctor in town, and has got the biggest practice, but he never was a boy, you'd think, to see his stern ways."

"Oh! that's where you don't know what you're saying, Ethan," broke in Lub; "now I know Doctor Whittaker better'n you can, because he often takes dinner at our house with his wife. He looks mighty severe, but all the same my mother says he has a big heart. Seems like years and years ago he had a boy, and he

died, and I guess that must have nearly broke Doc Whittaker up."

"Then there was that bad egg of a nephew, Elmer," continued Ethan; "I've heard that he disappeared in some sort of a cloud. He was wild, they say, and must have got into a scrape, for he went away, and for some years now nobody's heard a word from him."

"Well, everybody knows," continued Phil, "that Doctor Whittaker has had trouble in heaps, and it's made the wrinkles on his face, with that frown Ethan speaks about; but as Lub says, deep down he's human, and can feel as well as anybody. I'm told that the poor people of Brewster think him their best friend, and that he never charges a family for attendance when he knows they're in hard luck."

"All right, Phil," said X-Ray, "now go on and tell us how it came Doc Whittaker put you wise where you could get piles and piles of fine hickory nuts this season."

"Oh! he happened to talk with me the other day when I met him in the post office," Phil obligingly replied; "I think he rather likes me, though just why he should I never could tell you. But anyway he up and asked me if some of the boys didn't like to go nutting any more, and when I said we always made out to take

one trip a season at least he told me about the Bowers woods."

"Bowers—is that where we're going, then?" demanded Lub; "why, I remember hearing my folks say something about a little Bowers girl named Annette, that Doctor Whittaker and his wife wanted to adopt, but her old aunt wouldn't give her up."

"That's the very one," admitted Phil. "I've got a note from the doctor in my pocket now to Miss Lucy Bowers, asking her to please allow the bearer and his chums to gather all the nuts they want in her grove. She used to have it done long ago, but of late years hasn't bothered with the crop, which is wasted, only the squirrels taking toll as they feel like."

"And this year they say there's a regular jumbo bumper crop of nuts," said Lub; "which is also a sign that we're going to have a hard winter."

"Talking about signs to tell the weather," broke out Ethan, "I was reading the other day how these here backwoods weather prophets tell when we're sure to have a mild winter. Some of 'em go by the goosebone, you know, but there are heaps and heaps of other ways of prophesying."

"As how, Ethan?" asked Lub, already deeply interested.

"Well," the other continued, "there's Mother Cottontail, the rabbit, when she knows it's going to get good and cold, she stands over there in the brush and pounds the ground with her hind foot. If in the fall she knows it's going to be an open winter she don't do that, because she reckons the ground won't freeze solid, and there won't be any need of her pounding her paws into shape for a cold snap."

"You don't say?" chuckled the unbelieving X-Ray; but Lub, built along more credulous lines immediately urged:

"Tell us some more, Ethan, please; I find it real interesting—if true!"

"That ain't all," continued the narrator, blandly; "according to this weather sharp, when the sun crosses the equinox along about September twentieth, if the wind was in the south it means the prevailing wind until the next equinox, March twentieth, will be from that direction, which promises a warm winter."

"But, Ethan, don't they go some on other signs, like bark on the trees, skins of fur-bearing animals and such?" asked Lub; "seems to me I've heard talk that way."

"Do they?" Ethan told him, sharply; "well, I should say yes. Look at the muskrat houses, this old weather prophet will tell you, ain't they building them low and thin this year? Ain't the goosebone showing only one cold snap, and that towards the end of winter? Ain't the slime of the fish light; and look at the corn husks, as scanty as can be; all things point to a warm winter; or if they're opposite, then fetch out your biggest overcoats, your sleighs and bobsleds, and yes, your snow-shoes as well, X-Ray, for it'll be a corking cold winter."

"Speaking of that same Elmer Whittaker," remarked Phil, "somehow I never could think him quite as bad as some people used to say he was."

"But he did have the name for being a loafer, you know, Phil," urged X-Ray, "and he went with some of the worst fellows in town."

"That's true enough, Ethan," admitted the other; "and if anything it was his going with such a tough crowd that got him his bad name. I think he must have been sort of fascinated by that clever Clyde Masterson, who always had a bunch trailing after him."

"They did say Clyde was a slick article," admitted X-Ray, "and used to make the fellows do almost anything he wanted. Yes, I reckon

that Elmer didn't have much show if he got under that chap's thumb. But the same Clyde landed in the penitentiary only last year, you remember."

"I saw Elmer do a little thing once that made me think he wasn't such a bad boy at heart, only thoughtless and reckless," Phil continued. "An old man who had been tippling I imagine, and couldn't walk straight on his way home, had fallen in the gutter, and was being made fun of by several tough chaps. Before I could take a hand myself, who should come up but Elmer Whittaker. He was a good-sized fellow, you remember, and you ought to have seen how he scattered that crowd, and set them to running. Then he talked to the old man, got him on his feet, and helped him along to where he lived in an old cabin."

"Well, I declare, I never would have believed that, if it was anybody but you told me, Phil!" exclaimed Ethan.

"Now you understand that what we used to learn in school is apt to be true," said Phil; "evil communications corrupt good manners; also bad associations do the same!"

"Hear that, Lub?" chuckled X-Ray suggestively; whereupon the stout chum instantly retorted:

"I'll have to be more particular after this who I associate with, then!"

"We must be getting along close to that Bowers place, eh, Phil?" questioned Ethan a little while after this.

"I should think so," replied the driver of the car; "but the fact is, I'm a little bewildered myself. I'd like to meet some one so as to ask a question or two."

"Well, I can see the smoke of a fire just ahead of us, and seems like some one might be camped close to the road," announced the keen-eyed X-Ray.

"Chances are it'd be a hobo," sneered Ethan; "and much he'd know about the people around here."

"There, you can see him now!" announced Lub, who was on his feet by then.

"It's a regular tramp, all right," said X-Ray, contemptuously.

"Warming his hands by the blaze, ain't he?" Lub went on to say, as they rapidly approached the spot where the smoke had been discovered.

"You're wrong there, Lub," interrupted Ethan, quickly. "More likely he's got a tomato can hanging over the blaze, and is trying to make some muddy coffee in the same. I've watched the whole operation more'n once.

These hoboes have got it down to a fine thing; and they can eat and drink what you'd turn your nose up at."

"Keep still, Ethan, no use letting him hear you say that," urged Lub, unwilling to give offense to even a stroller, if he could avoid it.

"Whoo! their hide's too thick to take anything like that to heart," declared the other, carelessly.

"Seems to be a young fellow; and look at the stubble of a beard on his face, as well as the dirt to boot," muttered X-Ray, as they bore down on the spot.

"And see him pull his hat brim down over his eyes," mentioned Ethan; "shows he's a bit ashamed of his looks, eh? or else mebbe now he's afraid we may be officers of the law. Lub here would stand for a corpulent cop, all right, given a uniform, a cap and a club."

"Let up, can't you!" protested Lub; but evidently he was thinking more about the lone camper's feelings, than what Ethan was saying about his own bulky figure.

Phil stopped close to where the tramp hovered over his fire. He had stooped down again, and was busily attending to the task of feeding the flames. Sure enough two cast-off tomato cans sat upon stones where the heat of the fire would

be apt to warm up their contents. When Phil saw this he guessed the tramp had a companion somewhere about, even if not in sight just then.

"Do you happen to know if we're close on to a farmhouse owned by a lady by the name of Bowers?" he asked the hobo. "I've slipped up a little in my reckoning, but seem to have an idea it can't be far away from here."

"Bowers, did you say, boss?" mumbled the tramp, and despite his efforts Phil was not able to get a square look at his face.

"Yes, she's a tall, thin woman, and has a sharp voice, though she isn't as unkind as she looks; Bowers her name is, and she has a little girl living with her, named Annette; likewise a hired man, and a big dog that she keeps chained in daytimes."

The tramp held up his hand.

"That's the dog barking right now, boss," he said; "just turn to the left when you get around the next bend, and you'll strike the Bowers place, sure pop."

"Thank you!" said Phil.

He might have tried to enter into conversation with the tramp, for somehow Phil seemed to feel more than a passing interest in him; but this was not what the hobo at the fire desired at all. Having answered Phil's question he de-

liberately turned his back on the occupants of the big car; as much as to let them know he had nothing in common with boys who could afford to roam around the country in such an expensive automobile.

"Whew! I like that!" muttered X-Ray.

"Cool as you please!" added Ethan; as though hardly knowing whether to admire the fellow's indifference, or be offended.

Phil only chuckled. Evidently he was amused more than anything else. He looked keenly at the tramp, and then shook his head.

"Thank you again, my friend!" he said aloud.

"Oh! that's all right, boss," replied the other, without bothering looking up again.

Phil had just started the car when a second tramp, a sickly looking fellow, came out of the woods nearby. He was carrying some sticks as fuel for the fire in his hands, and Phil plainly heard him exclaim:

"Hello! Who's yer fine friends, Briggs?"

And so Briggs was the tramp's name, probably assumed, Phil concluded.

Lub was so filled with curiosity that he managed to turn his body half way around and peep over the top of the rear seat.

"The one by the fire's looking after us, fellows, all right," he announced, promptly; "which

goes to show that his seeming not to care a snap about us was put on. Yes, he's shaking his head, and I guess feels right bad because some fellows can ride around the country in a fine car while he has to hump it afoot. It does seem mighty one-sided, don't it? But that's the way of the world. If we were going his way now I'd ask Phil here to offer to give the poor chump a lift."

"Course you would, Lub," remarked Ethan, "we all know that easy enough; and if Phil said he didn't have any room for more passengers, chances are you'd tell him you'd get out and walk."

"Oh! I don't know," muttered Lub, but looking pleased nevertheless because his chums had such a good opinion of him.

"You'd give your last nickel away, Lub," asserted X-Ray; "you're the easiest mark that ever came down the pike. But then we wouldn't have you anything else for all the money going. Here's the road we've got to turn in, isn't it, Phil?"

"It must be," came the reply, "and I can see the chimneys of a farmhouse over the rise yonder, among the trees. I was thinking it queer, that's all."

"What's queer, Phil?" demanded Lub.

"Why, tramps as a rule are about the least informed people you'll meet anywhere," replied the other. "They may know where some other hobo got a good meal, or where they keep an ugly dog, because they leave marks on gateposts; but names they never bother about."

"Oh! I begin to get what you're barking up the tree after," asserted Ethan; "you wonder how the tramp could tell you where to look for the farmhouse; is that it?"

"Yes," answered Phil, who had a line of wrinkles across his forehead, as though he might be trying to puzzle things out.

"He did seem to get on to the name, didn't he?" remarked X-Ray, suspiciously.

"He even mentioned it himself, and called it straight Bowers," said Ethan.

"Still, after all some of these tramps stop off to do a little work once in a while, and it might be this fellow knew Miss Bowers that way. She only keeps one hired man, I'm told, and it's quite a big farm. He may have worked for her once."

With that Phil strove to dismiss the matter from his mind. After all it did not amount to anything worth bothering his brain over. And besides, they were now approaching the low farmhouse, with the chained dog barking wildly from his kennel.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE HICKORY GROVE

"IS this Miss Bowers?" asked Phil, when, after the car had drawn up close to the farmhouse he and his three companions jumped out, to see a rather severe looking woman standing in the doorway, surveying them with mingled wonder and displeasure.

"Yes, I am Miss Lucy Bowers," she told them, shortly; "what do you want to see me about, young men? If it has anything to do with selling that strip of ground at the price the new railroad offered me, you might just as well turn around and run along. I haven't changed my figures a dollar; fact is, I'm thinking about hoisting a new price."

Phil smiled, and somehow whenever he did that he seemed to win hearts. Miss Bowers' face immediately lost a little of its frigid expression.

"Oh! that isn't what we've come up here for at all, ma'am," he went on to say, with boyish vim; "we represent the Brewster Orphan Asylum to-day."

"Well," remarked the woman farmer, with a grim smile, "all I say then is, that there doesn't seem to be any sort of famine struck the Brewster Orphan Asylum lately." The meaning glance she cast in the direction of blushing Lub caused Ethan to fetch that worthy a sly dig in the ribs, while he muttered:

"See what a bad name you give the whole bunch by swelling out so!"

Phil meanwhile had produced the letter of introduction given to him by Doctor Whittaker. This he respectfully handed to Miss Bowers. At the same time he became aware of the fact that a pretty little face, framed in an abundance of golden hair, was peeping out at him from behind the ample skirts of the farm mistress.

"That must be little Annette," Phil told himself.

"Isn't she a darling?" he heard the impressionable Lub saying softly.

And indeed, Phil no longer wondered why the childless old couple, Doctor Whittaker and his wife, had been trying for some time to coax Miss Bowers to let them adopt her little niece, though she had resolutely declined to do so.

No sooner had the letter been read than the manner of Miss Bowers changed. She no longer looked antagonistic. These boys were

not clever representatives of the grasping railroad corporation which she had been fighting so resolutely for such a long time.

"Well, now, I think a heap of Doctor Whittaker and his good wife," she exclaimed; "and if you're all friends of his I want to tell you right now you're welcome to step in and have a pitcher of milk or anything else I happen to have handy. And about them hickory nuts and the big walnuts, just help yourselves to all you can gather. If it'll help to make the winter seem shorter to the poor orphans I'd like to see you strip every tree. Are you Phil Bradley?"

When Phil, still smiling, admitted that he owned to that name, he saw a strong, if lean, hand outstretched.

"Shake hands then, Phil, and introduce your friends to me," she told him.

This operation was carried out in due process, and each one of the boys received a hearty squeeze from that hand evidently accustomed to hard work. Lub winced under the extra pressure she bestowed on him; for undoubtedly Miss Bowers realized that the stout boy was a universal favorite among his fellows.

Phil was not averse to stepping inside the farmhouse and accepting her kind invitation to

enjoy a bumper glass of rich milk. Miss Bowers rather interested him; and the sweet face of little Annette was certainly worth looking at, even if she did seem rather shy.

"You can run your car most of the way up to the grove, Phil," the owner of the big farm told him, as they prepared to step out again; "it'll save a heap of lugging of nuts, if so be you manage to get your bags full. And around noon I'll expect all of you to drop in and have a little snack with us. 'Tain't often Annette and myself have company. And my man left me yesterday, though I'm expecting another one to come any day now."

Somehow Phil heard this latter remark with just a trifle of uneasiness. Why it should be he hardly knew, unless the presence of those tramps near by had something to do with his feelings.

Not a great while back, tramps of a desperate kind, who were called yeggmen by the country police force, had committed a number of bold robberies through the upper tier of counties. For some time farmers' wives had been in dread lest they be visited by others of these rascals.

Miss Bowers looked as though she might be as good as any ordinary man, for her whole

manner indicated resolution. Still, she was alone and unprotected for the time being, and Phil hardly liked the conditions.

A hobo is a hobo under whatever guise he may sail. The young fellow who seemed to be ashamed, or afraid, to let them see his face fully, might be a desperate scoundrel for anything they knew.

Phil made up his mind to speak to his chums about this before they left the vicinity of the Bowers farm. Perhaps he might even mention certain facts to the determined looking lady herself, though he imagined she would scorn the idea of any harm befalling her. Phil had noticed a shotgun hanging on nails on the wall of the room they were in; and he did not doubt in the least but that many a marauding hawk had fallen before that gun in the hands of Miss Bowers, when trying to make a dinner off one of her chickens.

"Who looks after things while you've no man around, Miss Bowers?" Lub asked innocently; at which she laughed, and held up her two hands before him.

"Those are what do the work of 'tending the stock, milking the cows, and even holding the plow, when help falls short, Osmond," she told him; for of course the real name of Lub

had been mentioned when he was introduced.

"Gee! then you *are* a wonder, I must say," the fat boy remarked, and with such surprise and innocent admiration that she laughed boisterously.

"Oh! I've lived all my life on a farm," she explained, "and these things come natural to me. I could do a man's work easy enough, and be glad of it, because then when the sun sank I'd know I could rest. But a woman on a farm has to cook breakfast for the hired help before sun-up, work the livelong day, and do her baking, it may be, after her folks have gone to bed, yes, and sometimes her churning too."

They all liked Miss Bowers. Lub voiced the general feeling when, after they had started slowly in the car up the narrow lane which led toward the grove of hickories and walnuts, he exclaimed:

"She certainly is a peach, and the hardest worker I ever ran across; but she's all wool, and a yard wide every time. And say, she's got a big heart, too, because I could see a tear in her eyes when she was talking about the poor orphans."

"What d'ye suppose she means by a grove of nut trees?" asked Ethan; "I never knew they could be found that way anywhere. Generally

there are a few walnut trees in a meadow; and some hickories in the woods; but a grove, say, that beats my time."

"It might be that a long while ago some ancestor of hers planted a lot of these younger trees among some old ones. There was a time when farmers used to make nuts pay them more or less. Nowadays they go in for apples and a lot of other things that bring more money."

Phil had heard this mentioned, and he was one of those boys who never forget any interesting facts that they come across.

"Well, that must be the grove right yonder," said X-Ray Tyson, whose keen eyes were always on the alert.

"Yes," added Ethan, "and it runs right into the woods, too, seems like. Whee! it's been a long time since I've set eyes on such a stack of big timber. Some of those trees are whoppers, ain't they?"

"Here's where the little cow road stops," remarked Phil; "and we'll have to take our sacks and climb the fence, so as to walk the rest of the way."

"Thank goodness it isn't far," sighed Lub, who was evidently thinking of the time when those same sacks would possibly be crammed with heavy nuts, and difficult of transportation,

especially to a fellow who had to carry an extra load on his own account.

"And the best way to get to the grove is to pass through the end strip of that timber, don't you think, Phil?" demanded X-Ray Tyson.

"You're right about that," admitted the leader; "because there's a stretch of blackberry bushes that cuts us off the short way—a regular tangle of them, too; and I'd hate to have to push through such brambles."

"Of course we might take down the fence, and run the car right along up to the grove," suggested Ethan; "but hold on, that'd never do, for I can see a swale, or a creek bed that'd hold us up. I guess it wouldn't pay to bother. So it's over the fence for us, boys."

Phil saw that each of them carried his share of the empty sacks.

"Wish the coming back was just as easy as this," grunted Lub, as he dropped to the ground after mastering the high cattle-proof fence, that, like everything else about the Bowers farm, seemed to be kept in "apple-pie" order.

"Oh! don't worry about crossing a stream before you come to it, Lub," Ethan told him; "if you do your part of the business to suit us, and shake all the trees so as to make the nuts rattle down, like I told you before, mebbe we'll

let you off from lugging the filled sacks to the car, eh, boys?"

"Sure thing," asserted X-Ray, magnanimously.

"Huh! you're mighty kind," chuckled Lub; "but please don't count on me doing all that dropping. I'd be in fine shape now, wouldn't I, to go off with Phil here to his dandy little shooting shack down on the North Carolina shore, like he talks of taking us?"

"Well, then you'll have to stand for your end of the log, Lub," said Ethan, severely; "which means you must climb your tree, and shake down nuts till your two sacks are up to the brim."

"I'll do the best I can, Ethan," replied the other, firmly; "climbing isn't one of my strong holds, I'm sorry to say."

"But we know what is," retorted X-Ray; "and say, it was worth something to see how Lub's eyes sparkled, and his lips watered, when Miss Bowers invited us in to have lunch with her. He looked as happy as peaches and cream."

"Yes," added Ethan, "and you watch and see if he doesn't get away with what lunch he's fetched from home along about ten o'clock this morning."

"I will if I happen to feel like I'm starving," protested Lub, stoutly. "What's grub meant for but to eat, tell me, somebody? And when you're invited to dine out why should you keep hanging on to a cold snack, till it gets all dried up and fit only for the hogs? I use common sense when I figure things out, let me tell you."

At that the other pair laughed.

"I guess you've got the best of the argument, Lub," commented Phil, who extracted considerable amusement from these periodical disputes among his chums; for he knew very well that everything was given and taken in good part.

"Talking of that shooting box of yours down there on the Currituck Sound marshes, Phil, however did you happen to come to buy it?" Ethan asked next, as they started to pass through the timber that lay between the nut grove and their present position.

"Oh! I didn't buy the place at all," Phil hastened to tell them. "It came to me in a queer sort of way, and I don't mind telling you about it. Fact is, I thought I'd done so long ago. It was left to me by a man for whom my father had done a great favor of some kind. He was a queer chap, and spent all of his time hunting and fishing. Some people said he'd been left in the lurch by his girl when a young man, and

was bent on never seeing the face of womankind again when he could help it."

"Well, he *was* a queer fish, for certain," admitted X-Ray, who was known to be something of a beau in Brewster, and loved to attend all the barn dances and such entertainments, always with the prettiest maid in the town as company.

"Long after my father's death I received word that this Mr. Alexander Putney had died and left me all his property. It didn't amount to a great deal, but one of the places happened to be some acres on Currituck Sound, that a gun club had wanted the worst kind, because it held the best 'point' for duck shooting known in that section, and a little house which I always call my shooting box or lodge."

"Have you ever been down there to shoot, Phil?" asked Lub, wonderingly.

"To tell you the truth, I never have," the other replied. "I've meant to go several seasons, but school duties prevented; and then I didn't have the right kind of chums who could keep me company. Now this epidemic has changed the complexion of things, and I've got you all to go along."

"Then somebody is taking charge of it, I suppose?" questioned X-Ray.

"Yes, I have a man looking after the property," Phil told him; "though I imagine there's little farming done. He gets oysters and clams, fishes quite a lot, and in the winter shoots ducks and geese for the market. What with the money I pay him to look after things he seems to be able to live fairly well."

"Oysters, clams, fish, ducks,—well, I should think he would enjoy life on such delicious fare!" said X-Ray, who was particularly fond of those very things.

They were pushing steadily through the woods. The immense size of some of the trees struck them as worthy of notice. Phil even expressed a wish that he had been thoughtful enough to fetch his camera along with him.

"But you see I use it mostly for flashlight pictures at night time," he remarked, "and I've got it fixed in a way that gives me some bother to change. But none of us have seen finer trees around Brewster or up in the mountains."

Ethan had started to give his opinion of the matter, which seemed to be about along the same lines as that of Phil, when suddenly Lub was heard to shout.

The fat boy had managed to stray ahead of the rest, which in itself was an unusual occurrence, and worthy of note. On looking at him

the other three discovered Lub standing there, staring toward a certain point as though transfixed with alarm.

"Oh! didn't you see it?" he cried, in a voice that fairly quivered.

"See what, Lub?" demanded Phil, instantly.

"The—the bear!" stammered Lub.

"Bear!" echoed the astonished Ethan, "whereabouts, Lub?"

"He crawled right in that big hollow log there, I give you my word he did!"

CHAPTER V

THE HOLLOW LOG

"HOLD me up, somebody, I feel like I'm going to faint!" ejaculated Ethan.

"A bear down here so near Brewster!" added the incredulous X-Ray Tyson; "why I don't believe one's been seen for ten years, Lub, you sure must have dreamed it!"

"Didn't either," persisted the other, who could stand up defiantly when he believed he was right. "Saw him as plain as I see you right now."

"And you're sure it was a bear, are you?" asked Phil.

"Well, it looked mighty like one, that's all I know!" declared Lub, just to show them he could not be made to "take water," as Ethan called it.

"Which log was it?" asked X-Ray.

Thus urged Lub only too willingly pointed it out.

"It's a humper of a log, too, you see, fellows!" he went on to say.

"Well, if size counts for anything that log is certainly big enough to accommodate a black bear every time," agreed Phil.

His manner told that he had serious doubts, and Lub resented it as a sort of slur upon the accuracy of his eyesight.

"Guess I know what a bear looks like, don't I?" he exploded, "even if most all I've seen did happen to be in cages, with the circus that comes every spring to Brewster. And let me tell you, laugh as much as you like, I even thought I heard him *growl* like anything when he crawled in the old tree trunk."

"Oh! he growled at us, did he?" snorted Ethan, who evidently was very much inclined to doubt the sturdy assertion of the other.

"It's easy enough for you to make out you don't believe what I'm saying, Ethan Allan, but prove it, that's all!" exclaimed Lub.

"As how?" requested the other, uneasily.

"Why, there's an easy way to settle it," he was told. "I believe one thing, and you stick out for just the opposite. Either there's a bear in that hollow log or else there isn't. I'm for it, and so it stands to reason I don't want to take the chances of getting hugged to death, or scratched to flinders; but you snap your fingers at the idea. Now just suppose you walk up and

look inside that log so as to show us you mean what you say!"

"Huh! think you're smart putting it on me that way, don't you?" demanded Ethan, who however manifested no great enthusiasm over the idea of carrying out the brilliant little scheme suggested by the ingenious Lub.

Phil Bradley laughed.

"It looks as if Lub had you there, Ethan," he remarked. "Either put up, he says, or shut up. If there isn't a bear in the log you stand in no danger; if Lub saw what he thinks he did, then we'd like to know it. Are you going to back down and acknowledge the corn, Ethan?"

"Oh! well, of course there *might* be a chance of such a queer thing happening, I own up," admitted the other, reluctantly, after contemplating the matter.

"That means you won't step up and investigate then, does it?" asked Lub, grinning in anticipated triumph.

"Well, if only I had a gun, or even my trusty hunting-knife along, I'd take your old dare up in a jiffy," he was told by Ethan; "but let me tell you, a black bear can hug a boy to death, they say. I'm not hankering after being squeezed that way. Now laugh again, Lub;

you just think you're putting one over on me, don't you, but you ain't all the same. I'm just showing my Yankee caution, that's all."

"Oh! I see!" was all Lub said, but he tried to throw all the scorn he could muster in those few words; for it was not often such a glorious chance to rub it into either Ethan or X-Ray came along.

"Phil, what about this," asked the latter, turning on the leader; "do you think it possible a real bear could wander this far down from the Adirondacks?"

"Yes, it is possible, but not probable," Phil told him.

"Don't hedge, Phil, please," urged Lub, anxiously.

"But what would tempt a bear to approach as near a farmhouse as this is, Phil?" asked Ethan.

"An idea just happened to strike me," the leader replied. "But in mentioning it I don't want any of you to understand that I'm saying I believe Lub really did see a bear, though he thinks he did."

"But what sort of an idea is it, Phil?" X-Ray inquired.

"Listen," Phil continued, impressively; "of

course you all know how black bears are fond of anything sweet?"

"Sure they are," said Ethan, "and that's why I've always warned Lub here he'd be the first one of our bunch they'd tackle, haven't I, Lub?"

"Oh! quit that sort of guff!" the other besought him.

"Out in the woods in some places bears hunt for honey trees, and if they can manage to get at the stuff they don't care for the stings of the bees a bit. And perhaps none of the rest of you happened to see what I did as we came though the back yard of the Bowers place."

"Ginger! Phil, you're right!" exclaimed X-Ray, "there was a double line of bee-hives standing there under a row of vines on trellis work."

"Now, if there did happen to be a black bear anywhere near here," continued the other, with a nod and a smile in the direction of Lub, "he might smell that honey, because bears have good scent you know. And it would be what you might call a drawing card for Bruin."

"There, told you so!" exclaimed Lub, triumphantly, as though he considered that what Phil had just remarked proved his case beyond all question.

"Hold on, Lub, and don't crow so soon," warned Ethan. "Notice that Phil always made out to say that one word 'if.' Sounds to me like he didn't take any too much stock in your yarn."

"Yarn!" sniffed the fat boy, "I like that, now, after I've proved my case, and you backed down. But go on and say what you're a mind to; I'm done. All I want to tell you is that you don't coax me to peek in that same log. I know too much for that, if I am a greenhorn. Bears and me don't have anything in common."

"Except appetite," added X-Ray.

"Then you decline to go forward and investigate, do you, Ethan?" asked Phil.

"Well, if the whole of us went in a bunch, that is, all but Lub here, who couldn't run as fast as the rest, I'd be willing to take up the dare," admitted Ethan.

"How about you, X-Ray?" continued the leader, as though he had some purpose in view, and wished to eliminate all who were unwilling to make martyrs of themselves.

"Same as Ethan," chirped the other, promptly; "in union there is strength. United we stand, divided we fall, you know."

"All right," said Phil, "and now I don't want to hear any more from either of you, because I'm going to tackle the job myself."

"Whee!" gasped Lub; "I knew if anybody had the nerve it'd be you, Phil."

Ethan and X-Ray looked a little sheepish. They would have liked to insist that they be allowed to share in the danger Phil meant to incur, but they knew him too well to expect he would give in, especially after each had respectfully declined the honor in advance.

"Well, so long as you're in good running trim I guess you can make it if anything should come out after you?" ventured Ethan; which remark caused Lub to nod his head, and grin still more, for it convinced him Ethan was not nearly as skeptical as he pretended to be.

"There's a way of finding things like this out without taking too many chances, if you stop to think about it," Phil continued, meaningly.

"Gee whiz! now why didn't I get on to that myself?" Ethan was heard to say, as if in reproach over his blindness.

"What do you mean by that, Phil?" asked X-Ray.

"Tracks!" Ethan told him, before the leader could utter a word.

"Oh! why, of course, a bear couldn't scrape along the ground, could he, without leaving some sort of a trail behind him?" said X-Ray Tyson.

"How easy to say that after you've been told," Lub observed; "same old story of Columbus standing an egg on end, and all the Spanish courtiers not knowing how to do the trick till he knocked it a little, so as to break the shell."

"I'll swing around some," Phil continued, "and come up, so as to cover a section of territory on the side of the log where the hollow lies."

"It was on the left, Phil, that I saw the old bear crawling in," interrupted the first discoverer.

"When I run across anything that looks like a track I'll give you this signal," and he held up one hand as he spoke, with all the fingers extended upwards.

"And if everything looks good beckon us to come on, will you?" inquired X-Ray Tyson, eagerly.

"Only too glad to do it," Phil informed him.

"Be careful, please, Phil," urged Lub, solicitously.

"Oh! chances are three to one it was only a 'coon you glimpsed, or something like that, Lub," he was told. "It may have looked as big as a house to you, because you happened to be excited. Optical delusions may occur to any of us, you know. Wait here till you get word from me, remember."

They promised him, though Ethan and X-Ray did exchange looks that bordered on shame, as though they were beginning to feel pretty small.

Phil, true to his plan of campaign, was seen to swing around, so that he might not have to approach the end of the log directly, but by a round-about course.

"I wonder now if there is anything in that scare!" Ethan was heard to say, as he looked severely toward Lub, who however scorned to reply; no doubt he actually believed his warning was about to be justified, and that Phil would make a startling discovery presently.

Taking advantage of the fact that both the others were following all of Phil's movements close, and not observing him at all, Lub began to look first over his right shoulder, and then the left.

He was not contemplating running, because that did not happen to be one of his strong points; but a convenient tree that even a clumsy chap like himself could climb if hard pushed was not to be sneered at in such an emergency.

When he actually discovered such a friendly tree close by, Lub sighed in relief. His heart felt much lighter from that time on; indeed, he

could even pay strict attention to what Phil Bradley was doing.

Now while Phil had plainly expressed his disbelief in the accuracy of Lub's wonderful discovery, he was at least not a reckless boy, and felt that he should take ordinary precautions.

That was why he made that little detour so as not to approach the suspected harboring place of the savage animal too boldly.

Besides, that idea of picking up the trail, and in this way determining on the nature of whatever had crawled into the hollow log appealed to Phil, who loved to exercise his knowledge of woodcraft when the occasion arose.

"Now he's beginning to close in a bit, you notice," commented Ethan, presently.

"Does that mean he's found anything?" asked X-Ray Tyson.

"It may, and again he might be only thinking the trail would lie somewhere near by there. Watch and see what he does next."

Even Lub was intensely interested. He knew that having a haven of refuge so close as that tree with the low-growing limbs, he need no longer feel worried about his own personal safety, and so all of his anxiety centered on the daring comrade.

"There he goes down on his hands and knees, you see!" Ethan continued.

"And he's examining something or other, as sure as you live!" muttered Lub, almost holding his breath in suspense.

"Yes, that's plain enough," admitted Ethan.

"Look at him holding up his hand," exclaimed X-Ray; "but he doesn't wiggle his fingers any, for us to come on, does he, fellows?"

"Not that I can see," returned Ethan; "you know he told us he'd make that sort of a signal if he found the trail; and like as not he's done it."

"Then perhaps Phil knows by this time it *was* a real live bear I saw!" remarked the positive fat boy. "You can see that while he's started on again he acts just as cautious as before."

"Well, what of that?" demanded Ethan, weakly.

"If he knew it was a fake wouldn't Phil jump up and walk straight over to the old log so as to kick the same, and show us the scare was all off? I guess that's what he'd do every time. But notice how he's crawling along now, right on his hands and knees. Every little bit he stops, and pokes his face down closer, so as to read the signs again. Strikes me Phil is bothered some to make out the same."

"Wait!" grunted Ethan.

Keeping their eyes focused on their chum the trio of lads watched him drawing steadily closer to the suspected log. There was no sign of life about this fallen tree. If indeed a stray bear had crept into the hollow he must be lying mighty still just about that time, not wishing to betray his hiding place to his two-footed enemies.

"Now he's struck something that looks good to him," Ethan broke out again, presently; "you can tell that same by the way he bends down, and examines every bit of ground. Then he sits there, and looks at the old log."

"Just like he half expected to see something rush out at him!" insisted Lub, as if to show them his sublime confidence was as strong as ever.

"There, he turns his head to look this way!" said X-Ray Tyson, quickly.

"And he's beckoning to us for fair, you notice, Lub!" cried Ethan. "Remember how he said he wanted us to come to him if he did that? Well, everybody get a move on now."

"And I can notice him laughing, too, to beat the band," X-Ray continued, as they started toward the spot where Phil knelt on the ground.

"But see what he's doing now," added Lub;

"what d'ye think he means by holding a finger that way on his lips?"

"Oh!" replied Ethan with deep sarcasm, "I suppose he doesn't want us to make any noise, to wake the old bear up from his nap, that's all."

Lub knew that this was intended as a sort of joke, but all the same, not being yet wholly convinced that all danger was past, he cast a sorrowful look over his shoulder, as though he regretted very much that he had been coaxed to abandon that friendly tree; because, like as not there would not be another as available in case of sudden necessity in the entire woods tract.

CHAPTER VI

WOLFGANG SMITH'S BOUND BOY

"OH! what is it, Phil?" asked Lub, as soon as he and his two companions reached the kneeling leader, who was still smiling broadly.

"Get down here and see for yourselves," replied Phil.

Accordingly all of them made haste to comply, even Lub being apparently desirous of examining the tracks, whether they proved to be those of a ferocious bear or some other beast.

"That would be the queerest bear track ever," declared Ethan, immediately he saw the marks on the ground.

"And I know a dog's track too well to think one made this, and this," added X-Ray as he pointed to several places.

"Seems like something had been dragged along, that's what!" asserted Ethan, who evidently thought his supposed knowledge of woodcraft was being put to the test by Phil Bradley, who must already have guessed the truth.

"Getting warmer, Ethan," advised the leader, encouragingly; "now, suppose you take a squint ahead a little, and tell me what you think."

When Phil said this he drew them on several yards, and pointed downward. Instantly both Ethan and X-Ray Tyson uttered exclamations of wonder.

"That isn't a bear track!" cried the latter.

"More likely a human made it; and say, what d'ye think, he's barefooted in the bargain!" observed the Yankee lad.

"It's kind of small, too, and must have been made by a boy!" continued X-Ray.

"How about a bear now, Lub?" asked Ethan, with a scornful look in the direction of the positive one.

"Oh! well, anybody is liable to be mistaken," replied Lub, serenely. "I just got a glimpse of something that I said made me think of a bear. And I don't go back on a single word, either. You wasn't so dead sure it wasn't a bear yourself, Ethan, or else you'd never have backed down the way you did. A boy, eh? Now, tell me, what under the wide world would a boy be sneaking around here for, and dodging us by crawling into a log like this?"

"We'll try and find out," Phil told him.

With that he walked along until he had come

to the big hollow log. One look convinced him that the same marks could be seen distinctly at the opening; as though the boy, creeping along on hands and knees at times, to avoid being seen, had crawled into the yawning cavity.

Phil gave the log a series of kicks. Then he stooped down, and called in as friendly a voice as he could possibly muster:

"Hello! you in the log; no need of hiding any longer, because we know you're there. Show a leg here. We won't hurt you!"

There was a brief silence.

"He didn't hear you, Phil," said Lub.

"Or else he's afraid to come out," suggested Ethan.

"Give him another hail, Phil!" urged X-Ray Tyson.

"It's all right; I can hear him squirming back to the exit now," remarked the leader of the four chums, confidently.

"Yes, that's right, he's concluded to come out," Lub continued, showing considerable more interest in the expected appearance of his "bear" than might have been anticipated, considering the rude smashing of his theory.

Then a pair of bare feet came into view, succeeded by torn trousers; finally a boy smaller than any of them had wriggled free from the in-

terior of the log, and stood there, with tousled hair and dirty face, looking expectantly and almost desperately at each of the four chums in turn.

"Well, who in the dickens are you?" demanded X-Ray, impulsively.

"And what were you doing in that log?" Ethan added; "now don't tell us you were chasing a rabbit, and followed it in there, because we wouldn't believe it. You saw us coming, didn't you, and tried to hide?"

The urchin gritted his teeth as though he felt himself at bay. Then he shot out the words:

"Yep, I was skeered that you'd come arter me, that's what!"

"But why should any one come after you; what have you been doing?" asked Phil, at the same time looking kindly at the poor lad, as though wanting to reassure him, for he did not just like the way the strange boy gritted his teeth, and glared at them; it made Phil think of a rat cornered and at bay.

"Runned away, that's all," the boy answered; but there was a world of meaning, yes, and of suffering, too, Phil decided, back of those few words.

"Who'd you run away from?" he continued.

"Ole Smith," came the answer, sullenly.

"Who is he?" asked Phil.

His kindly manner was already beginning to influence the boy, for by slow degrees that defiant hard look was commencing to leave his dirty and thin face, while his eyes lost some of their burning fires.

"Who, Ole Smith? Don't ye know him? Why, he's a farmer as lives up here; an' they ain't a meaner one goin', lots o' people sez."

"What is Smith to you, boy?" continued Phil.

"Oh! I'm on'y his bound boy, thet's all. I gotter to work fur him till I grows up and gits old enough to be let go. But I jest calkerlate I cain't stand for it any longer. I'd sooner die than be took back thar."

"What's your name, then?" asked Lub, who was listening to all this with a look of deepest sympathy on his round, rosy face.

"I'm Casper—Casper Bunce," the boy told them, simply. "I lived in the poorhouse till Old Wolfgang Smith he kim along, an' figgered he could make me useful. My mam she's there still; he wouldn't give her a home, and I'm right glad he didn't, 'cause she'd a been nigh starved. The poorhouse is bad enuff; but 'tain't anything like thet Smith's way o' livin'."

He shuddered as though things came before

his mental vision that were anything but pleasant to recall.

"But if this Mr. Smith took you as a bound boy," Phil remarked, soberly, "he's got the law back of him. Even if you did run away he can get you again. If we helped you we'd get into trouble, if he ever learned about it."

"Oh! I knows all thet," affirmed the runaway, with a sneer on his face; "I ain't askin' nobody to help me a whiff. Jest let me be, and I'll either git away er else die in the woods. Sumtimes I thinks that'd be the best arter all. I ain't gut nawthin' to live fur."

Lub, seeing that no one was noticing him, blew his nose very loudly just then; but Phil had a suspicion that this was partly done so as to wipe away a stray tear or two that insisted upon coming into his eyes. You see, Phil knew Lub's nature.

"But if you were legally bound out to this Smith, you'd have to show a pretty strong excuse before anybody'd believe you ought to be helped," Phil continued.

At that the runaway seemed to hesitate.

"Oh! well, I reckons I mout as well show yuh!" he muttered, as he began to tug at his ragged coat, cast it off, and then started to draw his shirt over his tousled head.

Lub noticed that besides that thin coat and worn cotton shirt he had nothing to cover him from the chill fall air from his waist up. These wretched garments and his trousers constituted the extent of his limited wardrobe.

No sooner had he flung his shirt to the ground, and turned his back toward them than the boys uttered all manner of horrified exclamations.

No wonder, when they saw that the poor fellow's back was striped with welts that made them shudder simply to look upon.

Phil Bradley gritted his teeth, while his eyes flashed fire.

"My stars!" gasped X-Ray Tyson.

"The fiend!" muttered Ethan; "I reckon that name of Wolfgang about fits him."

"Oh! poor fellow!" whimpered Lub.

"So that's the way this Farmer Smith treats his bound boy, does he?" Phil observed. "What kind of a whip did he do that with, Casper?"

"It's a kind o' thing he's made outen leather, and she's gut a lot o' tails to it. He makes me take off my shirt, and let him tie me to a post in the barn. Last night he done told me he was goin' to gimme the wust lickin' to-day I ever got, jest becase the hoss stumbled an' broke the harness agin. It's so rotten it cain't hold any-

thing. So I ups and lit out; and I ain't a goin' back if I kin help it."

"You bet you ain't, if we can help it, Casper!" exclaimed Ethan, forcibly.

"And we think we can," added X-Ray.

"Good! good! that's the ticket!" applauded Lub, dancing in his excitement.

It was plain to be seen that Phil would have the entire backing of his crowd in any arrangement he might see fit to attempt, looking to the immediate relief of the runaway bound boy.

Upon hearing these kindly remarks Casper hardly knew what to say. It had apparently been a good long while since the poor chap had known what sincere and disinterested kindness meant.

"Put on your shirt again, Casper," said Phil; "it makes us have the creeps just to see how terribly you've been flogged. That old rascal should be taken before a justice and punished. He isn't fit to have any boy bound out to him."

"I'd like the chance of giving him a taste of his own medicine, that's what," declared Ethan, grimly. "I could listen to a savage like that *howl,* and enjoy it. Why it looks like he near murdered you, Casper."

"But he never made me give tongue, even a whimper!" said the boy between his set teeth;

and somehow when he saw the flash in those eyes Phil realized that here was a true specimen of human grit that would make anything he or his well-fed comrades had ever accomplished "look like thirty cents," as Ethan would likely say.

"Well, you're not going back to Wolfgang Smith, if we can help it, and we think we can," Phil told the little fellow, at which the boy looked in his face.

Then a wonderful thing came about. All the merciless whipping in the world had not been able to wring a solitary tear from those flashing eyes; but just now they were dimmed with moisture. The boy suddenly gripped Phil's hand, and actually kissed it, though Phil quickly snatched it away, as though he could not quite stand that. But all the same he was greatly shaken by this exhibition of gratitude on the part of Casper; and the resolution he had taken to assist the runaway to escape was no doubt immensely strengthened.

"Sometimes I've dreamed thet a kind friend took me away, an' give me a job where I could work hard, and mebbe git my mother to live with me," the boy was saying. "I'd do anything in the world if thet only could be; 'case you see

she's all I got left to me; and she ain't agoin' to live long if she stays in there."

Phil had made up his mind. He knew he was in a condition where he could do all sorts of things for this wretched boy, yes, and for his mother as well.

"Cheer up, Casper," he immediately said, "it was the luckiest thing that ever happened that you didn't manage to crawl into your log without being seen. You owe a heap to this chap here, Lub Fenwick. He thought it was a bear, for a fact, but then that doesn't matter. And we're going to see you through some of your troubles, make up your mind to that."

"Good for you, Phil!" chattered Lub, enthusiastically.

"Amen!" said Ethan; nor did he mean anything irreverent when he said that, for the sad story of the boy, as well as those black and blue stripes, had stirred up the fountains of his boyish heart until he felt waves of feeling passing over him.

"We're up here to-day from Brewster to lay in a big stock of hickory nuts for the orphan asylum down there," explained Phil; "and when we go home this afternoon we'll take you with us."

"And you won't have to walk, either," declared Lub, as though that part of it appealed strongly to him; "because we've got a big automobile up here to carry our crop home with us."

"I'll take you to a good friend of mine, Casper, who's a lawyer, and let him see what sort of a trade-mark this same Wolfgang Smith puts on his bound boys. You'll get another deal, as sure as you're born; and if it's possible I'm going to have it fixed so your mother can live with you."

The boy rubbed his eyes. He looked a little dazed.

"Think you're only dreaming, don't you?" ventured X-Ray, kindly; "but there's no danger of you waking up, and finding that bully of a farmer standing over you with his cat-o'-nine tails. I only hope they find some way to make him pay for all he's done to you, that's what."

"I've got an idea!" exclaimed Lub just then, and they could see that he was making a frantic dive into some of his pockets.

"It's a good one, too, Lub," said Phil, guessing what had struck the fat boy to make him look so joyous.

"When I'm not eating myself there's nothing I enjoy so well as to see some one else munching away," declared Lub, producing several pack-

ages from various receptacles, which showed how well provided he must have been against a famine; "and if Casper here ran away last night, I reckon he hasn't had any breakfast, so here's my stuff, and he's welcome to every crumb."

"Ditto here!" echoed Ethan, not to be outdone.

"Count me in," added X-Ray Tyson, as he produced his "snack," done up in brown paper, and tied with a string.

How Casper's eyes did open with astonishment. Very likely the poor fellow had never, so long as he could remember, seen so much that was good to eat placed before him as when the four packets were opened.

"Suppose you come along with us to the nut grove, Casper," suggested Phil; "then you can eat your fill; and afterwards, if you feel like helping us gather nuts why we'll get our bags full the sooner, and can start home earlier in the afternoon, because you're sure going with us."

They were just starting off, with the hungry boy beginning to tear at one of Lub's thick chicken sandwiches, when he was heard to give vent to a cry of alarm. The boys turning saw him staring at something that had caught his eye, and looking in that direction they discovered a big burly rough-appearing man hurriedly crossing a field near by so as to intercept them.

CHAPTER VII

STANDING BY CASPER

"NOW what d'ye suppose he wants?" exclaimed Ethan.

"And who is he in the bargain?" demanded X-Ray Tyson; "this is Miss Bowers' woods, and her hickory grove, ain't it? We haven't been trespassing on some other person's preserves!"

"My stars, but doesn't he look mad, though?" Lub was heard to remark, in a low and half-suppressed voice.

"Casper, do *you* know that man?" asked Phil, abruptly.

"You bet I do," came the prompt if shaky answer.

"Is that your Mr. Smith, Wolfgang Smith?" continued Phil.

"It's sure him, and he's come to take me back to his place, too. I might a knowed it'd all end in smoke. I never kin get away from *him!*"

A note of abject despair rang through these low spoken words. Poor Casper looked disconsolate. It made Phil's eyes flash, and he gritted his teeth as though he had his mind made up.

"Don't try to run away, Casper," he said, "we're going to stand by you!"

"Bully for you, Phil! that's the ticket," exclaimed X-Ray, and he reached down and secured a particularly stout billet of wood that happened to catch his eye; X-Ray always did have a happy faculty for discovering a way to utilize things, and no doubt just then he thought that since the aggressive farmer was so big in stature a club of like build was quite essential.

His example was contagious. When one boy does a thing the rest are apt to copy after him. So in this case Ethan immediately cast about him in search of a likely cudgel; Phil himself got his eye on one that he could reach with a single leap if there arose a sudden necessity; while even peaceful Lub actually doubled up his pudgy fists and looked pugnacious, something quite foreign to his nature.

By then the farmer had arrived pretty close to the boys.

"Found ye at last, hev I, ye poorhouse brat?" he called out, shaking his forefinger angrily toward Casper Bunce, who never made the slightest sound of a reply, because very likely his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth just then, for he had long entertained only fear and hatred toward this hulk of a master.

Then Phil carelessly stooped down. When he straightened up again he seemed to be holding some object in his right hand. The farmer thus far had only eager eyes for his runaway bound boy; but now he found his attention attracted toward the other figures forming the group.

He stopped short about ten feet away. It may have been because he was slightly winded from his fast walking; but then there was also a chance that the way those four Mountain Boys lined up in front of Casper Bunce may have had something to do with his sudden halt.

"Here, who be you boys; and what d'ye mean a standin' between me'n my apprenticed hired help? He run away from me, and I've been huntin' high'n low for the cub. Come over here, you Casper, d'ye hear me tellin' ye?"

He made an imperious gesture with one of his big hands. Doubtless in times past the poorhouse boy had been accustomed to obeying his slightest whim, and being harshly cuffed in the bargain. Phil felt him make a slight movement, and like a flash he threw out a detaining hand.

"Don't you stir a step, Casper!"

Phil said this out loud, and for a distinct purpose; he wanted the farmer to understand that

he and his chums meant to stand by Casper, and the sooner he got that intelligence through his thick skull the better.

Of course when he heard Phil speak in this bold way Wolfgang Smith fairly boiled with rage. His face became purple, and he could be seen to splutter at the mouth, just as all people do who have ungovernable tempers, and are bullies on the slightest provocation.

Shaking a tremendous fist at the boys, which X-Ray Tyson afterwards likened to a California ham, he burst out with a series of wild threats.

"What tomfoolery is this here, I'd like to know? Mebbe you boys ain't aware that the law is back of me in this business? That boy has been regilarly bound out to me. I'm serving in place o' his father, I am. I'm his boss, his master, an' he's jest got to toe the mark, or git what's comin' to him. Now, if so be ye got any sort o' sense 'tall ye'll advise him to come home with me peaceable like; 'cause I'm bound to get him sooner or later."

"Don't be too sure of that, Mr. Wolfgang Smith!" said Phil, coolly.

The mention of his full name somehow had a certain effect upon the old farmer.

"In course he's been tellin' ye a lot o' lies

about haow he's been treated; but it's all a made-up yarn, every thread o' it. He's got a decent home, ten times as good as the poorhouse where I got him. Course he has to work; every boy on a farm does that. But he's a bad egg, and gives me heaps o' trouble."

"That's what you say, Mr. Smith," remarked Phil, "but there's always two sides to every story. Casper doesn't agree with you. His idea of a comfortable home isn't the same as yours. In fact he says he'd sooner die than go back with you."

"The ungrateful little runt, the miserable poorhouse brat!" gasped the furious man; "so that's the way he looks at all I've done for him, does he?"

"He says he's been anything but happy with you," continued Phil.

"All his own fault," snapped the man, frowning; "he made up his mind in the start he didn't want to work, an' that's caused heaps of trouble and ructions. Farm boys ain't got no right to any spare time. They has to get up long afore daylight, and keep hustling till long after dark. But looky here, you'd just better change your minds about sheltering my bound boy. I've come arter him, and I ain't agoin' back without him."

"I'm sorry to disagree with you," continued Phil, carelessly.

At hearing that the farmer made an aggressive movement, even advancing a step or two. This was the signal for X-Ray and Ethan to start waving the clubs they were holding in their hands; and even Lub was seen to elevate those clenched hands of his, which combined action had a deterrent effect on Mr. Smith.

"Hey! what d'ye mean by that?" he grumbled.

"Just this," said Phil; "we told you we meant to stand by Casper, and we'll do it, even if we have to oppose you by force. I tell you plainly, Mr. Smith, it will be the biggest mistake you ever made if you start anything just now. We're not in a humor to be easy with you. We've seen your *trade-mark,* and we don't fancy it!"

"Why—I'll have the law down on every lasting one of you imprudent boys!" snarled the farmer, looking as though still half inclined to rush the line of threatening enemies, in the endeavor to secure his prey.

Perhaps Casper may have been made so joyous by the fact that his hated and feared oppressor was being held up that he even grinned; and this would be the last straw on the camel's

back with Wolfgang Smith, who had never seen any look but that of fear and dread on his pinched face.

"Try it!" said X-Ray Tyson, who had been fairly itching for a chance to get a word or two in; "we'd just like to see you, that's all, Mr. Smith!"

"Do ye mean that you'd believe that rat sooner'n you would me?" shouted the man. "Why, he's only a miserable poorhouse cast-off, and I'm known as a successful farmer all through this region. Anybody'll tell ye that Wolfgang Smith's signature is worth ten thousand dollars. Turn the boy over to me, and I'll forgit how sassy ye've been."

"You'll have to excuse us, sir," replied Phil, with decision in his manner.

"I'm his legally app'inted gardeen, I tell ye!" continued the farmer.

"So you said before," Phil answered, quite unmoved; "and we're not differing with you, Mr. Smith; only sometimes the law makes mistakes. It did when it gave over a boy, soul and body, into *your* keeping, and then never tried to find out how you were taking the place of his dead father."

"He's been telling ye a pack of tales that ain't so," grumbled the farmer. "Mebbe I

have been a leetle bit rough with the cub at times, but he desarved everything he got. If he'd been my own son I'd done no different by him."

"I believe you there," snapped X-Ray, quickly.

"I reckon I've seen one o' ye down thar at Brewster some time er other, and I s'pose that's where ye live. Listen to what I'm agoin' to tell ye now, an' take due warnin' o' the same."

"All right, we're listening," said Phil.

"Speak your little piece, Mr. Smith," added X-Ray Tyson.

"Jest as sure as ye prevents me from taking back my apprentice, which the law has bound out to me till he gits o' age, that sure I'll go straight down to the town o' Brewster and swear out warrants for the arrest of every one o' ye. And I tell ye right now I'll press the charges aginst ye to the last notch!"

Phil turned to his chums as though to sense their opinion as to what sort of suitable reply should be made to this threat. He received nothing but vigorous nods and suggestive motions from the others.

"As to that, Mr. Smith," Phil went on to say, "we've got a big car here that'll accommodate one more without much trouble; and if you're in

any hurry to get to Brewster I'll offer to transport you there much quicker than you could go behind your best horses."

This remarkable offer rather staggered the man.

"You'll find thet the law is a dangerous thing to fool with, boy!" he called out.

"Oh! everybody knows that," replied Phil; "and perhaps even you may learn a few things in law before a great while. There's some testimony that won't lie going to be shown to the judge down at Brewster. Casper, come here!"

The shivering boy instantly obeyed. He seemed to feel perfect assurance now in his new friends, and to understand that they did not mean to hand him over to his old tormentor.

"Turn around with your back to Mr. Smith!" said Phil, grimly.

"Whee!" ejaculated X-Ray Tyson, guessing what his chum's move might mean.

No sooner had the bound boy turned as Phil directed than the latter, seizing hold of his ragged jacket tore it off with a single movement. Then another speedy action drew the faded calico shirt high up over the boy's shoulders, displaying those terrible welts in black and blue.

The farmer's face was a study just then, as

his eyes became glued on the terrible chart imprinted on the lad's back, and which marked the various episodes of his passion. He grew almost purple with rage and fear, for it must have suddenly burst upon him that the law gave him no privileges like this brutality must appear.

"There!" cried Phil, giving way to his anger at last, "look on your work, Wolfgang Smith. Every welt there came from your hand. Nothing you can do will blot it out. It stands there as a witness against you; and before the sun goes down this very night the same judge who handed Casper Bunce over to your tender care a year ago will have a chance to see how fatherly you've treated him."

The man stood there rooted to the spot for a brief spell. Apparently he could find no words in which to express the mingled feelings of hate, baffled spite and—yes, fear, that were now tugging at his heart.

When he allowed himself to give way to his ugly passions, and inflict torture on the poorhouse bound boy, he had never dreamed of the possibility of others seeing those plain evidences of his brutality.

"I allow that p'raps I hadn't orter a been quite so rough with the kid," he finally went

on to say, half apologetically; "but he sure did used to rile me with his sneakin' ways, and shirkin' work like he did. I'll even promise not to lick him any more, and be a leetle kinder to him, if so be he's a mind to furget it all."

Phil wanted above all things to be fair.

"Casper," he said, turning the boy around so that he faced the farmer again, "you heard what Mr. Smith said, didn't you?"

"Yes," faltered the boy, beginning to shiver dreadfully again.

"Do you want to go back to his house with him again?" continued Phil.

"No, no, please don't make me! I'd sooner die this very minit, sure I would!" pleaded the boy, wringing his hands in an agony of fear.

"All right, then," said Phil; "you needn't go with him. We'll take you home with us, Casper. It's settled, and don't you worry a bit."

"But the law give him to me to keep, and I'm agoin' to have him, let me tell ye," growled the farmer, again looking furious, and as if half tempted to try and rush the line of aggressive boys, though he did not like the looks of things any too well.

"Even if you could take him away from us, Mr. Smith," Phil told him serenely, "which we don't believe you can, it wouldn't make a bit of

difference. We've seen your handiwork on his back, and down in Brewster they're going to know about it; so don't you understand you'd be summoned to court to explain to the judge. And try as hard as you might, in two days' time you'd never be able to rub out those telltale welts from Casper's back!"

"We've sure got you coming and going, Mr. Smith," taunted X-Ray, who secretly would have been delighted to have the farmer take a notion to dash down upon his tormentors, because he was just itching for a chance to use that fine club, and pay the brute back for some of the blows he had rained on the shoulders of his bound boy.

At least Wolfgang Smith had a streak of caution in his make-up; most cowards and bullies do, it has been proven. He saw Phil spoke the truth, and that he was likely to only aggravate matters by assaulting the boys.

Unless he could regain possession of Casper, and manage in some way to hide him until those marks had been rubbed out of his flesh so that he could show him in court, there was some "rough sledding before him," as Ethan would have expressed it.

He stood there glowering at the cluster of sturdy boys, as though if he could only have

had his way they would drop down dead. They gave him back look for look, and did not seem to be a whit alarmed.

Finally he nodded his head. He really wanted more time to think matters over, when perhaps some solution to the difficulty might come into his head.

"Well, I don't want to hurt any o' you boys," he presently told them; "but don't think I'm meanin' to let the matter drop. That boy belongs to me. The law said as haow I was to take the place o' his father; and I reckon as haow a father's got a right to make his son mind. I'll get him back yet, see if I don't."

With that the farmer turned on his heel; but the last look he gave Casper was about as full of venom and meanness as it could possibly be.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GATHERING OF THE NUT CROP

THE man looked back once as he made his way toward the fence he had evidently scaled when he first caught sight of his missing bound boy in the woods.

"See him shake his old fist at us, will you," chuckled X-Ray, who immediately made derisive gestures with his club, as though daring Mr. Wolfgang Smith to return and try conclusions with them.

"I wonder if he will really try to have us arrested when we get home?" remarked Lub, a little uneasily; for the prospect of being taken to police headquarters as if he might be a common malefactor was not very pleasing.

"Let him do whatever he feels like," said Phil. "The truth is written on Casper's back, and any judge would commend us for taking sides with him. I would have been ready to defend him to the last extremity."

"And as for me!" declared the Tyson boy, "I'll never forgive Wolfgang Smith for being such a cautious man. He never deserved that

name, which used to belong to heroes over in Germany, not cowards. And to think I never got even a show to try out this elegant club."

"But he's gone, all right," ventured Lub, as the farmer vanished from view.

"And now we'd better get busy with our work," ventured Phil, as they again started for the adjacent grove of splendid hickory trees that some long-headed ancestor of Miss Bowers had planted, possibly scores of years back.

When they found themselves amidst the trees they were delighted with the prospect. Why, the ground seemed to be pretty well carpeted with nuts that had already dropped through the action of the frost in opening the outer husks, though possibly the better ones were still hanging on the trees.

"Just look at that tree, will you!" cried Ethan; "did you ever see such a crop in all your days? Why, there must be bushels right there. And lots of others are bearing as heavy a load. Enough here to supply five orphan asylums for a year, and then some."

"First of all let's begin to pick up the best there are on the ground," suggested Phil, as he took the small basket he had thought to fetch along, and which when filled could be emptied into a large gunnysack.

"Most of the fun to me is in climbing the trees, and switching the nuts with a long pole," remarked X-Ray, who being exceeding agile was perfectly at home when swinging among the upper branches.

"And we'll all have to do some of that before long," announced Ethan, "because you see, heaps of the nuts that fell first are wormy. The best ones hold on longer. Besides, as you say, X-Ray, a lot of the fun of gathering nuts lies in climbing the trees and knocking the same down—the nuts, not the trees, I mean."

"Well, I'm not built just right for climbing," sighed Lub, knowing they were giving him a sly dig, and resenting it accordingly; "but I'm willing to do the best I know how. Only I hope you don't expect me to climb up too far; I das'sent do it, you know. I promised my maw I'd be careful."

They were by this time all busily at work. Phil made Casper sit down, with his back against a tree, and start to devouring as much of the accumulation of lunch as he could possibly stow away. From time to time Phil would engage the boy in conversation, and in this way managed to learn considerable about his past.

Already Casper was brightening up. He

even later on stepped over to the little brook that sang over the pebbles in a corner of the hickory grove, and washed the dirt off his face and hands, Phil supplying a towel he had brought along for himself. And really, when this operation had been completed there was a wonderful change in Casper's appearance.

What he learned from the boy's account of his past only made Phil the more determined to stand by him. It was a chance to do a good deed that did not crop up very often in a boy's life.

"We'll all get our folks interested, Casper, don't you fear," he told the boy, and the reassuring words brought tears to his eyes again; "and there's sure to be some way found so you and your mother can get together again. Just you wait, and don't worry. We'll fix it for you."

Casper, having eaten until he could not take another mouthful, declared himself anxious to aid in the good work of supplying the orphans with nuts for the coming winter. So he picked out a big walnut tree that grew in the middle of the grove, and climbed up with the agility of a monkey, his bare feet giving him a purchase on the rough bark that made it easy work.

The way the nuts began to rattle down as

he shook the limbs made them liken it to a bombardment, or a hailstorm on the roof.

"If walnuts were all we wanted we could fill our bags by noon, seems like," announced Ethan; "but these smaller shell-bark hickories are another thing; and it takes a heap of picking up to gather a bushel of the same. But some of 'em are as fine as I've ever seen, not big like the shagbark ones, but fat as butter."

They were soon all up in trees. As X-Ray had said there is a subtle fascination about rattling the nuts down by shaking the branches, or else in using a long and pliable pole to switch them off in sections.

Even unwieldly Lub yielded to the temptation, though he was the last one to do the climbing act, and had to carefully pick a certain kind of tree which could be easily scaled on account of low limbs, and plenty of them.

From time to time one of the boys would burst into a song, for they were as happy and free from care as could be. Often they would call out all manner of spicy things to one another, from nearby trees, while the nuts continued to patter on the ground with a lively tattoo.

Casper had little to say; indeed, he never spoke unless particularly addressed; but for all that he listened to this merry chatter on the part

of his new found friends. He had never before been in the company of such lively and care-free fellows, and it was a revelation to him to see how happy any one could be.

Now all this while Phil had not forgotten something, which was the presence of those two tramps so near the Bowers farm. It bobbed up in his mind from time to time while he was perched in a lofty tree and showering the nuts down. Whenever he had an opportunity to glance toward the farmhouse, which could be occasionally seen through openings in the grove, or over the tops of the trees, if he were up very high, he always watched to find out if Miss Bowers were about.

Several times he discovered her issuing from the rear door as she busied herself in her ordinary culinary labors, perhaps getting dinner ready for her boy guests. Phil was always giving a sigh of relief whenever he discovered her, for this told him all was well.

"It may be I'm wronging those hoboes," he told himself, once, after he had caught sight of the woman farmer coming out to throw something to a score or two of smart chickens that came running when they saw the well-known pan in her hand, "and that they wouldn't think of trying to rob a lone woman whose hired man

had left her. She'll laugh at me if I warn her against them. All the same I'm going to do it at noon, when we eat at her table."

There was another who took a sly observation whenever he found a chance, and this was Casper. The poor boy had been in dread of Wolfgang Smith so long now that he could hardly believe his actual release from slavery had come about. Every time he remembered how the farmer had said so positively that he would get his bound boy back, by hook or crook, in spite of Phil and the others, Casper would fall to shivering again.

Then he would peer all around, just as if he more than half expected to discover a creeping form, a number of them, perhaps, and some with officers' silver badges on their breasts, making straight toward his tree.

Each time his fears proved groundless the boy would draw a long breath that usually ended in a little gasp; for he could not yet begin to believe this would turn out to be anything but one of those dreams that sometimes came to taunt him on his hard bed in the garret of the Smith farmhouse.

Once he actually laughed softly to himself. That was when he suddenly remembered how Phil, the best friend he had ever known in all

his life, had promised that in some way it must be fixed so that he and his mother could be together again, with a chance of finding happiness.

To get his mother out of the poorhouse would be better than anything that could possibly happen to him; and that was why Casper laughed; though his merriment sounded so strange to his ears that it almost frightened him. He did not know what it was to laugh like other boys; for the world had gone pretty hard with him ever since he could remember anything distinctly.

The morning was passing away slowly.

Every once in a while Phil would sing out that for a change they had better descend from their trees, and start to picking up again. Already the bags were getting to swell quite perceptibly. Phile figured that they would have at least one all around cram-full by noon, and ready to be tied up. Perhaps they might even be making a fair start on the second sack, for in all there were to be eight to be piled up in the tonneau of the big car, even if the load had to be tied on with the clothes line carried for that very purpose.

No one dreamed how very useful that same rope was going to prove before they wanted it for securing their cargo in place. It was after-

wards declared, by Lub as well as others, that when Phil first suggested fetching a rope it must have been in the nature of an inspiration.

"Must be getting along towards noon by now, I should think!" remarked Lub, on one of the occasions when all of them were on the ground gathering the results of their last foray in the trees.

"I've been expecting to hear that for some time now!" exclaimed Ethan. "I knew Lub would be missing his ten-o'clock snack, and counting the minutes till we got a sign from the house to come down to dinner. Guess that big conch shell I saw on the back porch is the horn Miss Bowers uses to call her hired man in to meals."

"But it's no more than a quarter to eleven," announced Phil.

At that Lub's hopeful face fell several degrees.

"Hear him groan, would you all?" mocked X-Ray Tyson.

"It's all very well for you to make fun!" declared Lub; "because when you feel empty down there all you have to do is to pull in your belt a few notches, and it don't matter. But I can't wear a belt, you see, and so I just have

to suffer all sorts of pains when I'm hungry, and there isn't a bite to eat around."

Casper was in the act of darting off to where he had left the balance of the lunch, when Ethan stopped him.

"We'd rather he went hungry till the proper time for feeding comes around, you see, Casper. This thing of eating ever so many times a day is what's made him so fat; and if he wants to keep on being one of the Mountain Boys he's got to pull in with his appetite."

"Ain't I a mounting boy right along?" demanded Lub, with a grin.

"Can you beat that?" asked X-Ray, pretending to fall back; "yes, you're certainly picking up flesh while you sleep. If you keep on they'll soon be after you with offers from the freak museums."

"That's a cruel blow under the belt, for one chum to give another," protested the good-natured Lub, reproachfully.

Casper soon realized that all this sort of talk was given and taken in good part, and that these new friends of his were exceedingly fond of each other. Somehow he was receiving a new view of life. Up to now what few boys he had known were of a quarrelsome disposition, and with a propensity for taking things that did not

belong to them, not fellows with any sense of honor among them.

"Time enough left before the noon spell for all of us to make another climb," announced Phil, as master of ceremonies, when they had been picking up for quite a little spell.

Lub sighed deeply. He wished they would let him stay there on the ground and do the gathering act, while the more agile fellows rattled the nuts down. But Lub was too proud to appeal to them; he even made out to obey the order with alacrity, carefully selecting as before a tree that offered special advantages to a boy of his heft.

Lub even made out to walk all around the tree before attempting to climb; just as though some inward monitor warned him that there was a chance of his falling, and discretion advised that he make sure there were no awkward stones cropping up to give him undue cruel blows on arriving.

He was soon about twenty feet up, higher even than he had gone on his previous trip in this same tree. Most of the nuts on the lower limbs had already been knocked down; and besides, the best ones can always be found higher up.

"Be careful, Lub, don't get rash!" called out

X-Ray from an adjacent hickory where he was very near the top.

"Yes," added Ethan from the other side, "remember that you're no fairy when it comes to solid weight; and even hickory branches can't stand for everything. It's a long ways down to the ground, Lub, a very long ways!"

Of course they were only trying to scare him. Lub knew that as well as anything, and he did not mean to let them see he felt at all timid. Why, he even risked passing out a step farther, despite the fact that the slender limb was already bending threateningly under him.

So he started to use his pole with telling effect. There were plenty of nuts to be threshed loose; and filled with the resolve to show the fellows that he could do his duty when the occasion arose, Lub overstepped the bounds of prudence.

All at once there was heard a distinct crash, accompanied by a startled yelp, and the greatest swishing of dead leaves and twigs imaginable.

Phil happened to be changing his tree, and was therefore in a position to see what was going on. At first he felt a thrill of sheer alarm, because a fall might turn out to be a serious matter to poor fat Lub.

Then as Phil continued to look, and caught

the real meaning of the astonishing situation his alarm quickly changed to wonder, and finally amusement. That the other two Mountain Boys had already discovered Lub's distressing predicament was evidenced by the loud shouts they were starting to give, coupled with all manner of useful advice, which unfortunately Lub was in no condition to apply to the case.

CHAPTER IX

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

WHAT Phil Bradley saw was Lub spinning around in midair, with both his arms, and his lower extremities as well, in constant motion.

When the hickory limb broke under his weight he started to twist himself around as if in hopes of being able to retreat to the body of the tree. Then he found himself starting to fall, and before he had gone many feet his downward progress was suddenly stopped.

In some wonderful fashion the seat of his trousers had become caught on another limb, so that there he was, suspended in space. He was unable to squirm around to help himself, and in momentary danger of dropping to the ground should the goods of which his trousers were made give way, or the strained limb above decide to snap.

Fifteen feet below lay the earth, but it looked all of fifty to the alarmed Lub, who knew how hard he would come down if he should complete the passage.

"Help me, can't you, fellows?" he managed to call out, after finding that it was utterly impossible for him to reach around and grasp the limb which had caught in his garments.

Both X-Ray and Ethan had slid hastily down their trees at the first outcry, for they feared the worst. When, however, they saw the astonishing predicament in which poor Lub found himself, their alarm turned to sheer delight. What was a dreadful impending calamity to Lub appeared only a freak, and a cause for amusement to them.

"Look at him taking lessons in swimming!" roared X-Ray, heartlessly.

"No, you're all wrong," declared Ethan; "he's practicing to become a trapeze performer, or one of those parachute droppers you see at the fairs! My goodness! but don't he carry on cute, though? And to think it doesn't cost us a cent to see the whole show."

"Let up on that, can't you, and help get me down out of this?" pleaded the unhappy Lub, ceasing his wild contortions, for he thought he had heard a suspicious creaking just above as though the strain might be proving too much for that limb.

"It makes me think of the old poem we used to read, about the captain's boy on board the

ship," said X-Ray; "don't you remember how she went, Ethan, when little Jack had climbed away up, and stood there on the main truck: 'no hold had he above, below; alone he stood in air!' Lub happens to swing instead of stand, but it answers the same thing."

"Quit joshing, and do something!" begged Lub, almost piteously, for he was beginning to get dizzy from hanging there.

That caused Ethan and X-Ray to realize they were carrying things too far.

"You climb up, X-Ray, and see if you can get hold of him somehow," suggested the boy from New England.

"But great Cæsar; how in the wide world d'ye expect me to lift *him,* even if I do get close enough for a grip?" demanded the one spoken to.

Indeed, that seemed to be the most puzzling part of the matter. An ordinarily agile boy might have been helped by a comrade, but it was a difficult task to raise a fellow of Lub's heft.

"Anyway, see if the ground's soft down underneath me! that's the least you can do for a fellow," groaned the boy above, once more beginning his contortions, in hopes of getting a grip on something or other.

"Where's Phil?" demanded X-Ray Tyson, suddenly becoming aware that it seemed strange they had not heard any directions coming from the one to whom they were accustomed to looking as their leader.

"He went off that way!" cried Casper, pointing as he spoke.

"And there he comes now!" said Ethan; "what's that he's got with him, boys?"

"Looks like a rope to me," suggested X-Ray; "yes, it *is* a rope, the one we fetched along to tie the bags of nuts in the car with."

"Oh! a rope!" cried Lub, weakly; "good for Phil; he knows the way to rescue me! Only tell him to hurry along, because I'm afraid that branch can't hold out."

"Quit your wriggling, then!" called up Ethan; "that's what'll help it to break. Keep still, and leave it all to Phil."

The boy who had known what to do in a sudden emergency came running up just then. He was making a slip-noose at the end of the clothesline as he came along.

"Here, somebody climb up with this, and manage to get it around his body!" he exclaimed between gasps; "I'm too winded to be any good. That's right, Casper, you can climb like a monkey. First pass the rope over a limb above, one

that is strong and sure. Then get down so you can reach Lub!"

Casper was only too glad of an opportunity to show them what he could do in the climbing line. He passed the loop around his own body, and was "shinning" up the tree in a twinkling. His bare feet gave him a wonderful purchase on the bark, and as the others saw the clever manner in which he mounted they could understand how those natives of the South Sea Islands can go up tall cocoanut palms with just the use of a circle of rope, and their hands and feet.

"Oh! hurry, hurry!" Lub could be heard saying; but there was really no need of this, for the boy climber was making marvelous time.

He seemed to know just what to do, too, for even before Phil could call out to direct him again Casper had passed the rope over a good-sized limb some ten feet above the dangling figure.

Then he made his way down and was soon hanging over Lub, trying to coax the noose to pass around his body.

"Take hold, Lub, and work the noose as far back as you can," called Phil; "get both your arms through it, whatever else you do."

"Will the rope hold me, Phil?" asked the fat

boy, a new fear beginning to torment him, as he remembered that ordinary clothes-lines were not so very stout and reliable, when heavy bodies were concerned.

"I think it will," replied Phil; "and what we want to do most of all is to help you up a little, so you can get a grip on that limb. There's Casper waiting to lend a hand, too. Altogether we'll hold you, never fear."

Presently, after the noose had been passed around Lub just below his arms, those below seized hold of the other end of the rope.

"Yo-heave-o!" cried X-Ray Tyson, as they started to pull. "Everybody get busy!"

Casper leaned away down, and managed to get a grip somehow on Lub's clothes; and as the three on the ground strained at the rope, first the limb above began to bend, the rope became taut, and then gradually Lub arose.

He was eager enough to seize upon some certainty; and consequently after Casper had managed to release the grip of the limb in the fat boy's trousers seat, Lub found himself astraddle again.

After that it was easy enough to gain the center of the hickory tree, and make his ponderous way to the ground. He was as red as a turkey's wattles in the face and fairly panting

for breath. Still, there could be seen symptoms of a faint grin there, as though the ludicrous nature of his late predicament was beginning to occur to Lub.

"Well," he remarked, after a while, when the boys had had their laugh out; "it looks funny, I admit, but let me tell you when I was dangling up there it seemed like an *awful* long ways down here. I felt like I was up on top of a lighthouse tower, with the cruel rocks lying below me. It made the blood rush to my head, and when a fellow gets dizzy like that he isn't responsible for what he says, is he, Phil?"

Lub always appealed to Phil when he felt that he was being unduly set upon by that pair of teasing chums; and he never sought consolation in vain.

"I should say not, Lub," Phil told him; "I wouldn't like to fall that distance, myself, and it would be harder on you. But all's well that ends well, they say; and Casper here did his part of the rescue act splendidly. You ought to thank him, Lub."

"I meant to," confessed the other, naïvely, "when we were alone. But I am obliged to him more'n I can tell. One thing sure, I'm done climbing trees for to-day. You can't blame me

any longer for feeling a little timid. Let me be the one to do the picking up act. I'm great on that."

"You never said truer words," commented X-Ray; "especially at certain hours, and around noon time in particular. Fact is, others have to hustle to keep you from picking up their share of the dinner in the bargain."

"Dinner, did you say?" burst out Lub; "I heard something like a horn while I was hanging up there; do you reckon she could have blown that conch shell for us?"

"It was only that big Plymouth Rock rooster crowing you heard," X-Ray Tyson told him. "He wanted you to understand he appreciated your trapeze act, and could go you one better, that's all."

"We've got half an hour to wait yet," added Ethan, severely, "so get busy everybody."

Lub worked like a beaver just to show them that he could be as good as his word; and he certainly did gather many baskets of the spoils of their labor.

Finally a loud sound was heard.

"There's your call to dinner, Lub!" X-Ray Tyson announced; and it might have been noticed that he descended his tree with considerable alacrity, which went to prove that the sum-

mons was just as agreeable to him as it could possibly be to the fat chum.

They were just starting off when Phil noticed Casper hanging back.

"Here, what's this mean, Casper?" he asked; "although you haven't been included in the invitation I'm taking it on myself to see that you get a seat with us."

"But I had lots to eat only a while back," objected the boy, looking embarrassed.

"That's all right, but there never lived a boy who didn't have room for a little more. Besides," argued Phil, "we don't want to leave you here alone. So jump in with us, and we'll all ride down to the house."

Perhaps that last point caused Casper to change his mind; at any rate he accompanied them to where the car stood. After Phil had cranked up, he began to back down the narrow lane.

As they drew up near the farm-house they saw that Miss Bowers had set a pail of water, a bar of soap, and a long roller towel on a bench ready for them.

"Wash up, boys," she called from the back stoop; "and then come right in; we're waiting for you, Annette and I. Why, who's this you've picked up? Is it one of the orphans

you're gathering all those hickory nuts for?"

Phil stepped over to where she was standing.

"You fellows wash first," he told the others, over his shoulder, and then turning to the good woman he went on to say:

"I suppose you must know a party by the name of Wolfgang Smith, Miss Bowers?"

"Why, I certainly do; he's been a neighbor of mine all my life; though since his wife died several years back he's been pestering me to marry him; but I know too much to let any man be my master."

"I see that you do know something about him," continued Phil.

Then he went on to explain how they had come upon poor Casper, and the story he had told them.

"I knew he had taken a boy from the poorhouse some time ago," Miss Bowers admitted, "and I've seen him working in the field when I drove past; but I never happened to meet him face to face. Go on, and tell me everything; though I begin to suspect what's coming, because I know Smith's temper."

When Phil explained what a terrible condition the boy's back was in she showed signs of anger.

"The contemptible coward!" she exclaimed,

warmly; "if ever he sets a foot inside my house again I'll give him a piece of my mind. The poor boy! And did you say his mother's name was Bunce? Why, I knew a girl long ago who married a man by that name. Wouldn't it be queer now if it happened to be the same. Here, boy," she called to Casper, catching his eye as he used the towel, "come this way a minute; I want to ask you something. Was your father's name Adkins Bunce, and is your mother the same who was once Susie Fowler?"

"Yes'm, that's both their names," replied Casper, rather in awe of Miss Bowers, though she immediately smiled down at him in a way that reassured him.

"Well, if that isn't a strange coincidence," she was saying; "that I should hear about little Susie after all these years. I wonder why she didn't look me up when trouble found her. But I'll go right away to-morrow to the poorhouse, and have her up here to stay with me. I need company the worst kind. And, Casper, after you've been to see the judge, and get the legal separation from the man you was bound out to, you're going to live here with your ma and Annette and me, do you hear? I'll give you an interest in running this farm. You're a likely looking

boy, and ought to be able to do a good day's work."

Casper never even said a word; he couldn't have spoken if he had been paid for it. All he was able to do was to seize hold of her hand and kiss it wildly. Those wonderful dreams of his seemed on the point of coming true; for his one great hope had always been to be able to work, and make a home to which he could bring his little uncomplaining mother from the poorhouse.

"And now let's be going in before the dinner gets cold," Miss Bowers said; "and, Casper, never mind one bit because you're barefooted, for I'm sure it's nothing to your discredit. The more shame to that Wolfgang Smith; Oh! wait till I have a chance to tell him something that'll make his ears burn. You'll have shoes, and warm clothes aplenty when you come to live with me, Casper. And to think your ma was my old friend, Susie Fowler."

And Phil, looking out of the tail of his eye at Casper, saw his face radiant. To himself the leader of the Mountain Boys was saying something like this:

"How glad I am we made up this nutting excursion, and then happened to run slap up against Casper. Happened—that word doesn't

fit in there at all; it was just destiny, that's what And now he's going to know what living is, poor little chap. Besides, I think it'll be a mighty good thing for Miss Bowers to have another woman in the house, to help her with the chores. Things couldn't have come about better, no way you might fix them."

And that bountiful dinner, where the table actually groaned under the weight of all sorts of country good things; was it any wonder Casper kept turning his eyes mutely toward Phil from time to time; because the thought of sitting down to such a spread several times a day must have seemed like a page out of the Book of Paradise to the half-starved bound boy.

CHAPTER X

WHAT CAME OUT OF THE HOLE

"ARE you much troubled with tramps up here, Miss Bowers?" asked Phil.

They were almost through dinner when he put this question to the owner of the big farm. She shook her head in the negative, and in return remarked:

"Whatever made you ask that, Philip?"

"Oh!" replied the boy, "because as we came near your place I was a little uncertain about where to turn in, and when we ran across a fire with a young hobo cooking something, I stopped the car to find out if he knew."

"And did he?" continued Miss Bowers curiously.

"He seemed to know your name, because he told us how to turn in," Phil explained. "As a rule these tramps don't remember one name from another. If he saw a certain mark on the post down at your gate he'd understand that the farm-house was good for a handout. If it was another kind of mark he'd pass on, because that would mean 'beware of a fierce dog!' "

Miss Bowers laughed.

"Well, how he could know me I can't guess, because there hasn't been a Wandering Weary Willy at my door for a month. And I always treat them right, too. If they are willing to do a little work for me, they can count on a meal, and I'll pay them in the bargain. I keep a woodpile handy to show them to."

"But you don't mean to say any tramp would actually work, do you?" asked Ethan.

"Oh! yes, half of them only want a chance," she told him, briskly; "what you see in the papers isn't true in every case. There are tramps, and then other tramps. A good many of them are lazy and good for nothing. Others are decent men who have actually lost their jobs, and take to the road looking for work."

"Then you're not afraid?" asked Lub, wonderingly.

Again Miss Bowers laughed.

"I'd just like to see the hobo who would dare insult *me,*" she told him; "I'd not only give him a piece of my mind, but very likely something else he'd remember a long time. I am prepared for any trouble of that kind, even if just now I'm without a dog, or even a hired man."

Phil felt relieved at hearing her say that so serenely. He realized that Miss Bowers was

no ordinary woman. She could do a man's work if called on; and at the same time had a tender heart, as her treatment of poor Casper Bunce testified.

The dinner over, the boys prepared to once more run the car up as near the hickory grove as was possible; because every yard meant less of a journey when it came to loading the heavy sacks of nuts aboard.

"Stop again on your way out, boys," Miss Bowers told them. "I may have a message for you to take to Susie Bunce at the poorhouse. The more I think of her coming here to live with me the better I like it."

She gave Casper a warm look as she said this, and how his eyes did glisten with the great joy that was in his heart. Phil thought he looked as though he felt like eating Miss Bowers on the spot.

"Pile in, everybody," said the pilot of the expedition, as they reached the car, with little Annette and her aunt watching them from the back stoop.

"And you think you'll get all the nuts the orphans can manage the whole winter, do you?" called out the owner of the grove.

"Yes, and we'll have plenty to go around our own homes in the bargain," Phil replied; "there

never was such a bumper crop of both kinds of nuts."

"And they're all to the good, too; as fat as butter," said X-Ray.

"Once you start to eating them, and it's hard to stop," observed Lub; and then as he heard his chums chuckle he turned fiery red, hastily adding: "but of course we don't find much time for that, when we're so busy."

Phil turned the car around, meaning to back up. It would make it easier to come out of that narrow lane, after they had loaded up with the cargo.

Again they left the car as before, and trooping through the strip of wood, presently arrived at the grove.

"Let's take stock, and see how we stand," suggested Ethan.

"A good idea, that," Lub coincided; "because it would be silly to knock down more than we could carry away."

There were eight sacks of all sizes, and already they figured that five of these had been filled, and were ready for tying up.

"Oh, the home stretch!" sang out X-Ray, gaily, as he proceeded to fasten a stout cord around the neck of a bulging bag, while Casper

held the loose material at the top, so he could pass the twine several times around.

"One more river to cross!" echoed Lub.

"You're wrong there," interrupted Ethan, "for we've still got three empty bags."

"But there's so many nuts we'll get them packed before two hours go by," asserted the confident Lub, who was feeling a great deal better since that aching void had been taken care of.

"Yes, and lots of trees haven't even been touched yet," declared Phil; "why, honest, boys, I believe you could nearly fill a moving van with the nuts there are in this wonderful grove. Whoever planted it long ago, I don't think it ever bore a crop to equal this one."

"Here's a buster of a tree over this way that I've been itching to tackle for some time," remarked X-Ray.

"Well, now's your chance," Lub told him; "and it is a daisy, too, as sure as you live. My! what big nuts it has away up there. And you're the fellow who can climb to the very top, X-Ray. I'd never dare go more than half way."

"Oh! well, we can't be all alike, Lub," the other reminded him, rather pleased with the touch of flattery which Lub had cunningly man-

aged to inject into his voice and words. "You've got your good points, lots of 'em; but they're different from mine. When it comes to holding down things you stand away up at the head of the procession."

"I'm pretty good at picking up nuts, too, X-Ray," remarked Lub; "and after you get good and busy up there shaking them down, I'll start filling a sack. We ought to get as many as we can here, they're such dandies."

So the nimble X-Ray immediately sprang up the trunk of the tree, and had Lub hand him his pole after he was located among the branches. Under ordinary conditions he might have begun operations near the top, but the temptation to use his pole assailed him immediately.

"I just can't resist knocking 'em down as I climb," he told Lub, who was watching operations from below, and careful to keep a safe distance, for he had already been hit by a number of the nuts, and sometimes it hurt.

There was a shower on the dead leaves, and a whoop from Lub.

"Whee! just see 'em come, will you?" he called out; "why, the ground'll be fairly covered long before you reach the top of the big

tree, X-Ray. Whack that branch again, won't you; it isn't near stripped? This looks like the best prize in the lot. Why, there must be all of two bags on the one tree, if you stripped it, and picked up all that fell."

So the boy in the tree continued to reach out here and there, and every time his long pole swept through the almost leafless branches of the great tree there was a sound like hail on the ground below.

Unable to resist the desire to get busy collecting some of the choice nuts Lub started in. He was discreet enough to cast occasional nervous glances aloft, meaning to confine his labors to the side of the tree away from where his confederate was working.

Of course Phil and Ethan and Casper were also doing their share of the labor, although the results were not as bountiful as in the case of the one who had discovered the prize tree.

From time to time they called out to one another, such were their abounding spirits. Ethan even started singing one of their school songs, with the others joining in the chorus. If Miss Bowers heard it, as she certainly must, since the farmhouse was not so very far away, no doubt it caused her to smile with pleasure. Such sounds were a rarity up there at the rather lonely Bow-

ers farm, since young people had been an unknown quantity for many years.

"Whoop! what's this? What's this?" Lub heard X-Ray suddenly call out.

The climber had possibly gone about half-way up the big tree, dexterously straddling each limb he conveniently could, and using his long pole to advantage.

Lub immediately looked up.

"What have you struck, X-Ray?" he demanded.

"A hole!" came the answer.

"Huh! is that all?" Lub asked, in a disappointed tone.

"But this is a pretty big hole," urged the one up in the tree.

"Do you mean in the trunk?" continued Lub, edging closer, since there seemed to be no immediate danger of a deluge of nuts descending on his head just then.

"Sure thing," replied X-Ray, promptly. "Must have been a limb rotted away here, and that started a cavity, as it nearly always does."

"Well, then, are you going to throw the hole down?" demanded Lub, laughingly.

"I'd like to, Lub, if it'd help you fill your sack," replied the other boy; "but I'm sorry to tell you it seems to be stuck fast to the tree."

"Hello! X-Ray, look closer and mebbe you'll see signs of bees around up there. If one of the swarms that must have come out of Miss Bowers' hives was looking up new quarters, they couldn't have hit a better place than up in a big hickory tree like this one."

"Nothing doing along that line, Lub, so don't let your mouth water any more," sang out X-Ray; "but I c'n see plenty of other signs around the same old hole."

"Signs of what?" continued Lub.

"Why, seems like some little animals might have their home in the hollow of the tree," the boy aloft explained. "I reckon now, it goes down a couple of feet, and for all I know more'n that."

"Squirrels, do you mean?" inquired Lub.

"Gray squirrels," corrected X-Ray; "because that's the only kind likely to take to a hole as big as this. Besides, I've proved it already, which shows how easy it is to figure such things out."

"How did you prove it, X-Ray?"

"Here's a gray hair caught in a little crack, and what better evidence would you want than that, tell me?" was the triumphant response.

"I guess that settles it, just like you say," affirmed the fat boy, as though filled with admira-

tion for the cleverness of his chum. "But do you think they're at home right now, X-Ray?"

"I wouldn't be 'tall surprised, Lub," came the confident answer.

"But just to think of all the racket we've been making around here for hours?" objected Lub.

"All the more reason squirrels would lie low in their snug hole, and never show their bushy tails once," he was told. "I know something about their habits, let me tell you. They frisk around in the morning, and then again late in the afternoon, but in the middle of the day they stay indoors and sleep."

"But in the Fall they've got to get busy and gather their winter supplies in, don't they?" questioned the stout chum, still craning his neck as best he could so as to watch the one high up in the tree.

"Not in such a bonanza nut grove as this one is, understand, Lub. Why, it must be a regular squirrel Paradise, I should think. All winter long they can get plenty of nuts; though I guess they do store some away, for days when the snow is deep."

"Knock on the trunk, and see if they're in," suggested Lub, eagerly.

"I'm going to do better'n that," he was told. "With the limber end of my pole I might shove

down inside, and stir up anything there lay at the bottom."

"Good for you, X-Ray; give a good punch! It'll be fun to see a couple of grays come frisking out, and jump across to some other tree. Take care they don't upset you. It's a terrible long ways down here."

"Don't you worry about me, Lub; I'm as good as any monkey in a tree. For three cents I'd even hang by my toes up here. Now watch and see what happens!"

So Lub leaned back still more in order to focus his eyes on the particular spot where he could see X-Ray fumbling with his pliable pole, trying to hold it up so as to insert one end in the cavity he had struck.

No doubt he was chuckling all the while as he contemplated the alarm which was sure to seize upon the pair of gray squirrels at having this mysterious object come poking into their winter den.

"What's the matter; can't you make it?" called out Lub, eagerly.

"Well, it's a bit harder to manage the old pole than I thought," admitted X-Ray, "but I'm going to do it if it takes the last ounce. There, that time I almost got the end of the pole in the hole. Now hold on, I think I see

how it's going to be done. Hurrah! down she goes with a squdge! Watch out below!"

What followed was most surprising.

Lub, staring upward, saw something shoot out of the gaping cavity in the trunk of the hickory tree; but surely it was entirely too large for any gray squirrel that ever lived.

Another, and then still a third came forth in what seemed like an endless procession. X-Ray had given a wild shriek when the leading animal passed him.

"Wow! he bit me!" Lub heard him shout.

"Oh! what are they?" cried the boy on the ground, lost in sheer amazement; and just then, as he seemed to catch sight of the ringed tail of one fugitive he hastened to add victoriously: "Raccoons, ain't they, X-Ray? And three busters at that! Look at 'em jump, will you?"

Just then a heavy body came whirling downward. Lub discovered it in time to duck his head, but it struck him square in the middle of his back, sending him sprawling on his stomach. There he kicked, and gave forth a number of agonized whoops, doubtless under the impression that he was about to be attacked by an army of mad 'coons, chased out of their refuge in the tree, and ready to take revenge upon any inoffensive two-legged human being.

CHAPTER XI

THE SUDDEN ALARM

BY this time Phil, Ethan and Casper had sighted the fleeing 'coon family, and their shouts were added to those of X-Ray and Lub. It was pretty lively up there in the hickory grove about that time; and Miss Bowers must have thought the boys were getting a whole lot of enjoyment out of their work.

"Look at 'em scoot!" shrieked Ethan.

"Oh! why didn't I fetch my camera along?" cried Phil; "I'd have had a splendid chance for a picture."

"One bit me on the finger, fellows!" X-Ray was calling; "say, Phil, is there any danger of blood poisoning setting in?"

"Get up, Lub, he's left you!" Phil told the sprawling fat chum, who was still doing considerable squealing, as he kicked his heels in the air, and tried to slap around his back with both hands, doubtless under the impression that he was being assailed by the whole army of angry "ring-tails."

Thus reassured Lub ceased offensive opera-

tions and even condescended to struggle to a sitting position. He could be seen carefully examining himself all over, as well as his bulk allowed, evidently in fear of finding that he too had received a few severe punctures from those sharp teeth.

"What'll I do about my finger, Phil?" demanded X-Ray, still remaining aloft.

"Suck it good and hard, that's about all," he was told.

"Oh! I did that right away," the other assured him; "but what d'ye think of the nerve of that rascal giving me a nip as he frisked by?"

Phil was laughing so hard he could hardly say anything. The way those alarmed raccoons had created a little whirlwind, after being so rudely disturbed in their snug den, had been what boys would have called a "circus" to Phil. And if he could only have snapped Lub off as he lay there kicking and fighting the air, he believed it would be a picture worth possessing, and one that would chase the blues away every time.

"Could you blame him, X-Ray," Ethan told the boy in the tree, "after you'd gone and broken up his happy home with your old pole? He just wanted to give you something to remember him by."

"Yes," added Phil, "and after this when you find a hole up in a nut tree, just think twice before you ram a pole inside. You never can tell what will come out. It might be a squirrel, or a 'coon, or a 'possum, or even a swarm of bees."

"Are they all gone?" asked Lub, struggling to his feet; and then hastening to bend over so as to roll up one leg of his trousers, as he fancied he felt something sting him there; though it would be mighty inconvenient for him to try and suck a wound down near his shin bone, he feared.

"Well, I should say they had," replied Ethan. "A scared 'coon can skip out right lively, let me tell you. I was so full of laugh I never bothered looking to see which way they did scatter, but they're far away by now. And anyhow, we're not out 'coon hunting to-day."

"What d'ye reckon they had their nest in this hickory tree for?" asked X-Ray. "I never knew that raccoons ate nuts?"

"Neither do they," replied Phil; "their ordinary diet runs along the line of green corn, dry corn, and such things. Some farmers say they get away with young fowls; 'possums certainly do, I've heard other men say, even if they're not nearly so destructive as weasels and mink

and fisher cats. How's the wound, X-Ray?"

"Feels pretty sore, let me tell you, because his teeth went in like fun," came the reply; "but it might have been a whole lot worse."

"I should say so," laughed Ethan; "what if he'd grabbed you by the end of your nose, wouldn't that have jarred you? Wrap a piece of your handkerchief around the puncture, and forget it."

"When you get home dab it with witch hazel, or some soothing ointment," added Phil. "But since the excitement is all over we might as well get busy again. What fine big nuts there are on this tree. Perhaps it'd be as well for us to get all we need right here. Casper, if you're not too tired, you might shin up and send a lot of those down from the top there."

"Take care, X-Ray," warned Lub, excitedly, as he saw the other make a move to withdraw his pole from the cavity that had yielded such a surprise; "there might be more of 'em inside the den. 'Coons often gather in colonies along in the fall, I've heard, as many as seven or eight living together through the winter."

X-Ray was very cautious about pulling the pole out, and could be seen to hold himself in readiness to dodge, should a fourth inmate make his appearance. But evidently three constituted

the entire community, for nothing happened.

Soon the nuts were rattling down again in a perfect shower, and those on the ground were being gathered by Phil, Lub and Ethan.

Lub must have had quite a shock when that heavy animal dropped on his broad back and knocked him flat. Phil could easily understand that the fat boy was still a little nervous. He cast frequent uneasy glances aloft, when he thought no one might be noticing him, and doubtless wanted to be duly warned should the adventurous X-Ray discover another mysterious cavity that needed probing.

Already two of the bags had been filled, and the last one started.

"Plenty down here to finish up with, fellows!" sang out Lub, finally.

"It's a hard thing to stop work when they're still so thick in places," replied X-Ray Tyson; "but then, what's the use of wasting your efforts for nothing? Guess I'll come down. I want to show you my finger anyway, Phil."

Evidently the boy was a bit worried concerning the consequences of his hurt. It might seem only a trifle in its way, and all that could be seen were a couple of bluish marks where the keen-pointed teeth had gone in; but it must have pained considerably. That was not what was

bothering X-Ray, however, and this fact was made patent after he had shown his hand.

"You see, Phil," he went on to remark, as if in apology for his nervousness, "I've read how hunters who've been injured by wild animals sometimes get blood-poisoning and die. And I don't want to take any chances. I'd sooner have that finger lopped off than to keel over, even if it is the best one on my right hand."

Phil smiled at hearing him talk like that.

"It's true enough as you say, X-Ray," he admitted, "but that's only under certain conditions. If a man's been badly clawed by a carnivorous animal, say a lion, a tiger or a bobcat, he'd better hurry and get something on the cuts, so as to neutralize the poison. That's being on the safe side."

"Poison!" echoed the wondering Lub; "whatever can you mean by that, Phil? How would a poor old wildcat poison you, I'd like to know?"

"He might not, but again there's always the danger," Phil told him. "You see, the long sharp nails of these animals are used to rend their prey; and they're likely to carry gangrene or some other poison into the scratches they make on you. Doctors in the hospitals are careful not to cut themselves with a scalpel they've

been using in dissecting. I've read of more than one dying from just such a thing."

"Gee! you give me a cold shiver, Phil!" gasped X-Ray, beginning to suck at his finger again furiously.

"Oh! there isn't the least danger in your case," laughed Phil; "a tooth is another thing, and that 'coon's tusks were as clean as a whistle, it stands to reason. But keep the rag around, so you won't get anything in the cut."

"First time I was ever bitten by a wild animal," muttered the injured chum. "I've been up against dogs more'n a few times, and got the scars to prove it."

"Oh! you're immune against any sort of bite!" Ethan told him. "They've got you inoculated good and tight, and nothing could feaze you."

"Less talking and more work, boys," warned Phil.

With five of them gathering it would be only a short time before the last sack was filled to the brim. Lub would not be sorry, for altogether his exertions had wearied the fat boy considerably.

What with the climbing; that notable adventure when he was suspended in space by the seat of his stout trousers; the stooping so much when picking up nuts; and last but far from least the

'coon scare, Lub felt as though it had been rather a full day for him.

"There's another hole in that tree over yonder," announced Ethan, pointing as he spoke.

"Excuse me!" promptly called out X-Ray; "I happen to be a fellow who knows when he's had enough. I pass."

"Try it yourself, if you feel that curious Ethan," suggested Phil.

"Oh! I never cared much about 'coons, to tell you the truth," replied the other, "and I've had about all the climbing I want for one day."

"That's good news for the ring-tails, I take it," laughed Phil.

"Everybody's satisfied, seems like," remarked Lub; "what a happy world this is. And I'm glad to say that beast never got a nip at me, though I reckon he tried pretty hard."

Of course that was all imagination with Lub, for Phil had seen that no sooner had the frightened 'coon landed on his back than it fled as fast as it could go. But then there was no need of detracting any from the satisfaction and gratitude that filled Lub's heart to overflowing, by telling him that.

"She's full enough, I should say, Phil," suggested X-Ray Tyson, with a sigh of relief, as he

emptied his hat of the last batch of nuts he had been gathering.

"Yes, you're right about that," Phil acknowledged; "and all we've got to do now is to tie up this last bag."

"Oh! I wish it was," remarked Lub.

"What's bothering you now?" demanded Ethan.

"Eight of 'em, and as heavy as lead, all to be carried across to where we left the car!" groaned the fat boy.

"Well, that oughtn't to worry you, Lub, for didn't we say we'd let you off from that part of the job?" X-Ray told him, scornfully.

"But what do you take me for, a shirk?" flashed Lub. "If you get one sack up on my back, I'll just show you that I can lug it all the way to the fence without a single rest. I may be clumsy, and a poor climber, but I'm as hard as rails when it comes to carrying loads!"

"Glad to hear it!" Ethan exclaimed; "it's going to make things easier for all the rest of the bunch. Here, somebody give me a hand, and we'll try Lub out with this last sack, which I reckon beats all the rest for size."

Lub shrugged his shoulders, but all the same he proved game. They saw him hunch up his

broad back as though getting in readiness to receive his load.

"Fix it so I c'n get a good grip at each corner, that's all I ask, boys," he proceeded to tell them.

"Hold on," interrupted Phil, just as the eager Ethan and X-Ray were about to lift the weighty bag, and place it on the bent back of the fat chum.

"But he said he could carry it; you heard him, didn't you, Phil?" urged Ethan.

"And we'd just like to see him make good," added X-Ray.

"Come on with your bag!" cried the undaunted Lub.

"There's no need," said Phil.

"Then you've got another scheme, have you?" asked Ethan.

"Well, there are eight sacks, all told," remarked the other; "and it's a pretty good haul over to the fence. So I was thinking that we'd be making time by taking one section of the fence down, and fetching the car right up here."

"But, Phil, how about that creek bed?" demanded X-Ray.

"Yes, how're you going to jump over that, I'd like to know?" added Ethan.

"I noticed some planks lying down alongside

the fence," they were told; "which could be used to make a temporary little bridge across the gully. They're strong enough to stand for the car, I'm sure."

"Oh! well," admitted X-Ray, "if that's what you want to do, of course it lets Lub here off; but I never will believe he could carry this sack all the way over unless I saw it done."

"Now you think you're just going to coax me to strain myself, when there's no need of it, don't you?" jeered the fat chum; "but I'm not quite such a silly as all that. Phil, I think your scheme is the boss one. Shall we go and get to work on that fence right away?"

"Lucky we've got a hammer in the toolbox of the car," said Ethan.

"Yes, we'll need it, to take that fence down, and put it up again," Phil added, as they left the eighth sack standing under the big hickory tree, and started toward the car.

On the way Phil took special note of the ground, also just how they could follow a zig-zag course among the trees of the wood patch.

"It's an easy proposition after all, you notice," he told them; "and some time or other a wagon has come through here, for the marks of the wheels show in spots. First of all, while two get busy taking down the fence, some one

help me make the bridge with those planks. Here's about the best place for it, I should say."

No one found any objections. Indeed, they seldom did when Phil laid out a plan of campaign.

Everything appeared to be moving along without the least friction; and the boys contemplated an early start for home, never dreaming that anything might happen to alter their plans completely.

It came as suddenly as might a bolt of lightning from what appeared to be a clear sky. The first thing they knew they heard a shriek in a woman's voice, that caused every one of them to stop whatever he was doing, and look in the direction of the farmhouse.

"Those tramps!" was the thought that seemed to cut through Phil's mind like a knife.

"Look at the smoke, would you?" whooped X-Ray, excitedly; "say, boys, let's run like anything, for it must be the house is afire!"

CHAPTER XII

ONLY A TRAMP

EVEN Lub started off on a wild dash in the direction of the house, the top of which could be seen over the rise of ground. Forgotten was fatigue, and everything else save the realization that something dreadful must be happening over there.

Of course the others easily outran Lub, though he did his level best, and puffing like an engine going up a steep grade with a long freight train behind, he persisted gallantly.

Phil's first thought had been of the tramps who were camping not a great way from the Bowers farmhouse. Perhaps it was natural for him to remember his fears in that quarter, since he had pictured them as hanging around with some base design upon the possessions of the woman farmer.

Of course when he discovered the presence of smoke he conceived a different explanation of the outcry. Miss Bowers had called aloud; and she was possibly working frantically right then to extinguish the conflagration.

Here then was a chance to show her that they were grateful for all the kindness she had exhibited toward them; and the way she had made poor Casper's heart glad with the prospect of a future home.

If Phil ran as he had seldom run before, X-Ray and Ethan managed to also eclipse their former records, for they kept alongside the other. Down that lane they went, helter-skelter, as though sprinting for a prize.

The further they went the more smoke they saw. Evidently, then, the fire was no small matter, but might prove serious indeed.

Now they had cleared the crest of the slight rise, and the whole house lay before them. Smoke was pouring furiously from several windows, as well as from the rear door.

"Oh! she's going to burn all up!"

It was really a wonder how X-Ray managed to say those few words, for apparently he needed every particle of his breath for his exertions while running; but they did come out, and possibly expressed just about what the other boys were feeling around that same time.

It looked like a bad fire, if smoke counted for anything. There was some one in sight, though at first none of them could exactly understand what was going on. Then Phil recog-

nized the figure as that of Miss Bowers herself.

She seemed to have had the presence of mind to wrap some sort of carpet or sofa covering around her in order to extinguish her burning garments. Even as the boys came tearing down the lane leading in the direction of the woods they could see her slapping furiously at parts of her apparel that may have still been smoldering.

Phil's first act was to snatch up the bucket of water beside the wash bench and throw the contents all over Miss Bowers.

The other boys had jumped to where they discovered some milk buckets sunning and sweetening by the side of the house. These they took possession of, and then made a bee-line for a water trough that was close by, with a pump by means of which it could be filled for the horses as they passed to and from the barn.

Thank goodness! that watering trough happened to be filled to the brim. It was a habit of Miss Bowers to always keep it so; and as it proved that state of preparedness turned out a very fortunate thing in this sudden emergency.

"Annette—where's the little girl?" cried Phil, as he looked around in vain to discover some trace of Miss Bowers' niece, the pretty winsome child whom Dr. Whittaker and his wife had

wanted to adopt, so as to bring some life into their lonely home.

She pointed toward the house, where the smoke was pouring out. The excitement had almost deprived Miss Bowers of her usually strong voice; but Phil managed to catch what few words she did let fall.

"In there—oh! my soul, will he find her and save her?"

"Who do you mean?" shouted Phil.

"The tramp—he rushed in when I told him she was there!"

It was of course a great muddle to Phil. After all, then, it seemed that one of the tramps did have something to do with the affair; though from what Miss Bowers said he certainly was not acting the part of a rascal, but rather that of a hero.

Phil started for the rear door. With those volumes of smoke pouring forth it did not look a very safe venture, but then the boy felt that as long as that child was in peril he must take the chances.

Just as he was about to set his teeth, draw a last long breath, and plunge into the interior he saw a dim form groping toward him, staggering as he came, and bearing some sort of burden in his arms.

So Phil clutched hold of the other and steered him out of the choking cloud of smoke. He saw immediately that it was the same young tramp who had directed them which way to turn in so as to get to the Bowers farmhouse, just as if he knew all about the lay of the land around that section.

Phil's heart felt cold as he saw that in several places the poor fellow's ragged clothes were ablaze. The first thing he did was to slap at such spots with his hand, and then his hat when he found that the fire burned him.

"Never mind me," he heard the other say; "I only hope the child isn't burned much; I tried to cover her in this thing; it was all I could find in the smoke there."

While he was talking the hobo started to take off the wrap. Seeing that he was very weak Phil hastened to help him.

At once he saw that little Annette had escaped without any perceptible injury. She looked very much frightened, of course, and the smoke may have sickened her somewhat, but at least the fire had not come near her tender skin; nor was her golden hair even singed.

With a shriek of gratitude Miss Bowers flew across and wrapped her arms around the child, who was now sobbing wildly.

Meanwhile Phil had once more concluded that the quickest way to put out any lingering sparks in the clothing of the tramp was to use water; and quickly securing a bucket of the same at the horse trough he doused it over him from head to foot.

The fellow sank to the ground, and Phil feared he must have been severely burned. However there was no time just then to pay further attention to him, if they expected to try and save the farmhouse.

Phil saw that his chums had already started operations. Even Lub, coming up just then, and seeing that there was at least a large-sized milk pan left for his use, proceeded to fill it with water, and advancing to where a tongue of fire appeared at a window he bravely threw the liquid at the blaze, and retreated for a further supply.

The other three went at their job with more sagacity. They knew the heart of the fire must be inside, and that the only way to get at it was to invade the premises, despite all that stifling smoke.

So they pushed in through the kitchen door. Swish went a pail of water, and then there would come a hissing sound as the hostile elements fought. A second bucket would follow, and

this was being kept up as fast as the boys could make their way to the horse trough and replenish the supply.

Casper had no bucket, but he knew just as good a way to make himself useful, and the feverish clanging of the pump told how he was trying to keep the water in the trough from going too low.

Boylike, Phil and the others could never work without giving vent to some of the excitement that was raging in their blood. They called out cheeringly to one another as they passed and repassed on the way back and forth.

"She's getting weaker, all right!" was what X-Ray shouted, waving his tin pail above his head; "gimme another supply! Oh! we're the boss fire fighters. Never mind, Miss Bowers, you ain't going to lose your home this time, not if we know it!"

"Keep things going like hot cakes, everybody!" called Phil, as he hurried toward the door again with a filled bucket. "And, Lub, you spell Casper at the pump. That baby pan doesn't do any good."

"Do a man's work, Lub!" roared Ethan.

The way they all worked was a sight worth seeing. Certainly the woman who knelt there, regardless of her own burns, and hugged the

trembling figure of little Annette to her heart, could not but feel that the bread she had cast upon the waters when inviting those boys to share her dinner was already coming back to her many fold.

Fortunately while the fire had seemed rather fierce in the beginning, the prompt coming of the boys, and the steady stream of water they poured upon it soon began to tell. Just as X-Ray had said, the conflagration was being overcome steadily, and victory seemed assured.

There is nothing that encourages one so much as evident success. Even Lub jumped up and down at that pump handle with continued vim and pluck as he realized that he was contributing his quota toward the grand finale.

He was too winded to do any shouting, but every time one of the others came to scoop up another bucket of water he beamed on his chum, and nodded his head encouraging, as though to assure him there would always be plenty of the necessary liquid in the trough.

The smoke still persisted inside the kitchen and the next room, but it was hard to find even a struggling flame at which to throw the contents of their pails.

All of the boys who had been in and out of the building so many times were suffering with

smarting eyes, on account of the pungent smoke. Phil dashed cooling water in his inflamed optics ever time he came to get a new supply of ammunition with which to keep up the good fight.

Once when Phil happened to think of the tramp, and cast a glance toward the spot where he had last seen him, he discovered that the fellow was no longer in sight. It was all a great mystery to Phil, and for the life of him he was unable to understand how the fire could have come about; and also how it happened the young tramp was on hand to rush into the house and save little Annette.

At any rate it had been a brave action, and there could be no discounting that. Miss Bowers was placed under heavy obligations to the unknown hobo. And Phil remembered very distinctly now, as though the words had been burned on his brain, her opinion of tramps, as expressed at the dinner table:

"There are tramps, and then other tramps. A good many of them are lazy and good for nothing. Others are decent men, who have actually lost their jobs, and take to the road, looking for work."

Apparently, then, this young hobo could not belong to the former class; if he had been bad at heart, lazy, or a coward he would never have

risked his own life because the lady had told him there was a child inside the burning farmhouse.

"We've got to find him, that's sure," Phil was telling himself as he discovered that the man had disappeared. "He's likely to be pretty badly burned, and ought to have attention as soon as possible. Just as quick as we get the fire out for keeps I'm going to start licketty-split for Brewster in the car, and take Miss Bowers and that tramp to the hospital."

"Smoke's getting less, ain't it, Phil?" asked X-Ray, rather weakly, as he met the other returning after another assault.

"It certainly is," said Phil, over his shoulder.

Then as they again crossed, with Phil carrying a full bucket, X-Ray Tyson was ready with another query.

"We ought to be able to call quits pretty soon, I should think, Phil, eh?"

"Another turn all around might settle it," came the reply as Phil hurried on.

Of course X-Ray imparted the joyous news to Lub and Casper when he arrived at the watering trough again.

"My last visit, Phil says; because we've got her under control. You've done great stunts, Lub, apumpin' that handle like mad. Gee! but

you look that red in the face I'd almost expect you were going to have a fit."

Then the nearly exhausted fat boy broke his long silence. He managed to spare enough breath to gasp out:

"Been pretty near a bucket of juice oozed out of *me* while I've worked this old pump handle. Listen to her creak, will you; she sure needs some oil after that hot job? Whee! I'm ready to drop flat, I am."

"Then let up, for there's plenty and to spare in the trough right now, as it stands," advised X-Ray, hurrying away under his load.

Well, the victory was won, and after all the Bowers homestead would not go up in flames and smoke, this time at least. Phil was full of curiosity to know what could have happened to start the blaze. He imagined that Miss Bowers was a careful woman, and not the one to try and fill a gasolene stove while one of the burners was lighted, or do any other similar foolish trick.

Dropping his milk bucket, and mopping his streaming face with his handkerchief he walked over to her now. The first thing she did was to seize his hand eagerly.

"How can I ever thank you boys enough for saving my home?" she exclaimed.

"Oh! that wasn't much of a stunt, Miss Bow-

ers," Phil told her, as Ethan too came up, followed by the other three. "Fact is, boys look on a chance to work at a fire like a picnic. We're all of us glad to have helped you. But how did it start in the beginning, Miss Bowers?"

"I bought a contraption the other day, that looked good to me. It seemed to be congealed alcohol, the agent told me that, and was to be used for doing a little ironing. I thought I would test it, when my dress caught in a nail, I think, and threw over the stand it was on. Before I could wink twice a great flame arose all around me. I think I must have shrieked once or twice, while I was trying to beat out the little fires. Then that tramp came running as if he might have been on his way to the house at the time. I suddenly thought of poor little Annette asleep in the room next the kitchen; and as soon as he heard me say that what did the brave fellow do but dash right in after her. But where is he? Oh! I hope he was not seriously hurt?"

"I saw him crawl back of the woodshed!" announced Ethan.

"Come, let's find him then!" cried Phil, with a great fear tugging at his heart.

CHAPTER XIII

HEADED FOR BREWSTER HOSPITAL

"OH! I hope the poor fellow isn't very badly hurt!" Miss Bowers was saying; and it spoke well for her heart that she could entirely forget her own distress in her anxiety over the wretched hobo who had carried little Annette out of the smoke and flame filled farmhouse.

There was a concerted rush toward the adjacent woodshed. Strange that Phil should have a certain little thing flash into his brain just then.

"It's a fact," he was telling himself, "that men who have been wounded in battle, just like wild animals and birds shot down, always seem to try to get away from the open, and hide in some shelter. Even this poor tramp dragged himself out of sight for some reason or other."

Just then X-Ray, who had wonderful vision, as has been said before, was heard giving tongue.

"I see him, boys; this way everybody!"

Phil, Ethan, Casper, and even Lub hurried after him. Almost immediately they discovered a still figure stretched out on the ground. It

gave them all a wrench to see at first that there was no sign of life about the tramp.

"Oh! is he dead?" wailed Miss Bowers, as she came panting up.

No one answered immediately, because they did not feel able to say one way or the other. Again it was X-Ray Tyson who made a discovery.

"He's coming to, fellows; I sure saw him move then! Somebody get water. That's the best thing you can do when any person's swooned."

Ethan dashed away to the horse trough. Hardly had he gone when the tramp began to struggle, and then by a violent movement managed to sit up. They heard him give what sounded like a groan, though he set his teeth fiercely together as if he did not want any one to hear him repeat it.

"He must be badly injured, I'm afraid," ventured Miss Bowers, as Phil turned around toward her.

"It looks that way," the boy replied.

"What can I do?" she demanded.

"Well, the only thing good to use on fresh burns is sweet oil," he told her. "If you have any of that in the house tell X-Ray here where to find it, and he'll go inside."

"It's in the bathroom, just at the head of the stairs!" she exclaimed.

"All right; I'll find it in a jiffy!" declared X-Ray, turning to bound toward the house.

"Look in the little medicine closet over the washbasin," she called out; "bottle with the glass stopper!"

"Yes, ma'am!" answered the hurrying boy over his shoulder.

Miss Bowers again turned to Phil. Somehow she seemed to recognize in him a boy who was beyond the ordinary.

"You're afraid of something, I know," she remarked in a low and trembling voice.

"What makes you think so, Miss Bowers?" he asked, uneasily.

"Because I can tell it by the way you act," she continued. "Now, what is it you've got on your mind, boy?"

"I'm bothered to know if he sucked in any of that fire as he came through," Phil said in almost a whisper. "You know that would be the worst thing he could have done. I've heard that people caught in a fire who open their mouths, and draw in some of the flame never do get well again."

"Ask him where he feels the worst," she urged

him, as though afraid to undertake the task herself.

So Phil bent over the tramp. Briggs—Phil somehow remembered that the other hobo had called the young fellow that—was sitting there very quiet. He must be suffering intensely, Phil knew. When any one gets an ordinary wound it often happens that a numbness sets in, and for twenty-four hours hardly any pain is experienced. But with a burn the opposite is the case, and all manner of excruciating tortures make the victim writhe, and often shriek out.

"Where do you feel the worst?" Phil asked him, gently, and showing by his manner as well as by his words that he felt mighty sorry for the poor fellow.

"Oh! that's hard to tell," the tramp replied, trying to make himself appear even cheerful, though the effort was more than he could manage.

"You mean you're sore all over; is that it, Briggs?" continued Phil, wishing X-Ray would hurry along with that bottle of sweet oil.

"Guess that's about the size of it," he was told. "The fire caught me right and left; but if it didn't scar the little girl it's all right. What does it matter if a poor tramp gets a little

scorching? Nobody's going to lie awake nights bothering about him much."

"But we do care, poor fellow!" said Miss Bowers, tenderly.

"I hope you didn't inhale any of the fire," continued Phil; "that is, suck it into your lungs when you breathed?"

"Oh! I don't think I did that," the other told him. "Not that I was ever inside a burning house before, and I haven't even been a fireman at all; but I knew it was a bad job to breathe through your mouth, and I tried not to."

"I'm glad to hear you say that!" exclaimed Phil; "here comes my chum with the sweet oil. If you can tell us where you feel the worst pain we'll do all we can to relieve you. Then you've got to be taken in a hurry to town so a doctor can see you."

"Oh! I hope you don't have to go to any such bother about me," said the tramp; "I'm only scorched a little, I reckon. If you'd help me up mebbe I could hobble down to our camp along the road there, and my mate'll take care of me."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Miss Bowers, with a determined ring to her voice. "What sort of a woman do you think I am, to allow such a thing, when you've risked your very life to save that of my little darling niece here?

You're going to be looked after. You'll find that there *are* people who can care for even a poor tramp when he's got the soul of a hero in his body. Now, don't you say another word, my boy, because I won't listen to it."

Just then X-Ray, coming on the run and carrying the bottle with the glass stopper, as designated by Miss Bowers, Phil immediately busied himself.

It seemed as though the most painful burns were on the upper part of the tramp's body, his legs having escaped fairly well. So Phil had Ethan, who had arrived with the water to find it no longer needed, assist him remove the wreck of the ragged coat worn by Briggs.

It was found that there were numerous angry looking red places, and several of them had a raw look that told of the skin being injured. This is always the serious part connected with burns, because it is so difficult to get the skin to cover the wounds again. In many cases skin grafting has to be resorted to, or else death will result.

Phil did not like the looks of these burns. He feared they might be very serious indeed; and immediately he made up his mind that hurrying through the operation of soothing the pain by means of the oil, he must get that poor

fellow into the hands of Doctor Whittaker at the hospital with the greatest possible speed.

Lub and the rest hung around, eager to assist in any possible way, though the sight of those inflamed spots on the young fellow's body nearly made Lub in particular feel faint.

"How about it now?" asked Phil, encouragingly.

"Feels a whole lot easier," came the faint reply.

"But you're in pain, all the same, aren't you?" continued Phil.

"Well, it does seem to give me a queer feeling; p'raps I ought to be ashamed to say it, because it can't be so very bad," the other replied.

Phil nodded his head.

"Ethan, I'll go over to the car and fetch it down right away; you stay here with him till I get back," he started to say.

"What are you meaning to do with me?" exclaimed the tramp, in an alarmed voice.

"Take you to town as fast as we can spin," Phil told him; "I wish you were right there in the hospital this very minute."

"Hospital!" echoed the other; "do you mean down at Brewster?"

"Yes, that's where we come from," Ethan assured him.

"But I don't want to be taken there!" expostulated the injured tramp.

Miss Bowers thought his mind might be wandering a little, caused by all the excitement, as well as the pain he was enduring.

"You need immediate attention, my son, and you'll get everything there. Doctor Whittaker, an old friend of mine, is in charge, and he'll pull you through in great shape, let me tell you."

Ethan heard the injured tramp heave a great sigh. Of course he supposed it had to do with his sufferings, and more than ever did the boy feel sorry. After that he would be more careful how he expressed a belief that all wandering hoboes were hard characters, and utterly incapable of feeling for others.

Lub on his part thought it was rather singular the way the tramp disliked being taken to Brewster, and the well-known hospital.

"They've got the softest beds there," he assured him; "and I've heard say that the cook is a real *chef*, who knows how to set up the finest spread ever."

To hear Lub say that one might almost suspect he envied the tramp the prospect when he came to have some of those splendid meals spread before him.

"Let's see if we can get him on his feet before

Phil comes along with the car," suggested X-Ray.

Gently then he and Ethan passed each an arm about the injured one, whose ragged garments had again been put in place. Miss Bowers hovered over them, ready to assist if it were in her power.

All at once Miss Bowers chanced to remember her remarkable appearance, with hair down her back, and clothes more or less saturated because of the water that had been thrown over her in order to extinguish the fire.

If she expected to keep the boys company in their hurried dash for town she had better secure some sort of long cloak that would in a measure hide her apparel. So she hurried away, calling back over her shoulder:

"Don't start without me, remember; I am going with you, not on account of my own little burns, but because I shall never rest easy until I have seen him taken care of by Doctor Whittaker."

Again Lub saw the tramp wince.

"Gee! those burns must hurt like anything!" was what the fat boy said to himself, as he noticed the shudder that passed over the other.

Briggs was standing up now, and with set teeth managed to hold his feelings in. Some

men would have felt themselves fully justified in at least groaning when suffering as he must have been; but never a sound escaped from the lips of the tramp.

"There comes Phil with the car!" called out Lub; "guess we'll let the nuts stay just where they are till we can come back for the same."

"Oh! nobody's going to bother about the nuts," Ethan told him. "First thing we want to do is to hustle for Brewster for all that's going. I only hope we don't get stuck in behind one of those big loads of hay that sometimes block the road where it's narrow."

Miss Bowers came running out of the house. She had evidently found her long and useful cloak, for it now covered her shabby burned dress. With a woman's dexterity she had also managed to secure her loose hair in some sort of a knot, so that at a passing glance no one might think there was anything unusual about her appearance to merit a second look.

"Shall we all go along?" asked Lub, anxiously, for he did not want to be left.

"No reason why we shouldn't, that I can see," replied Ethan, also determined to be on hand when they drew up at the hospital in Brewster, and help poor Briggs in to be attended to.

The car was coming as fast as Phil dared run it along that narrow and rutty lane.

"Fix it as comfortable with all the rugs as you can, fellows," reminded Lub, as he saw the automobile close at hand.

"Look out there, he's going to fall!" shrieked Miss Bowers, suddenly.

Ethan and X-Ray were just in time to catch the tramp, who had collapsed again. He must have been weak from some late sickness, or possibly the lack of nourishing food, for it could hardly have been the burns alone that caused this condition.

Of course it added to the alarm of all to have him lying there limp in their arms. Lub turned very pale as he stared at the tramp's face. Even under the dirt he could see that it was white; and Lub's tender heart throbbed like a trip-hammer with sympathy.

"The poor fellow!" he kept muttering to himself as he hung around; not that his help was needed in order to lift Briggs into the tonneau of the car, for Phil himself had jumped out and taken hold.

Between the three it was not difficult to accomplish what they wanted. The fact that the tramp had swooned, and could not groan if they

chanced to hurt him by accident rather helped them.

Once he had been seated the various robes were tucked all around him. This was done partly for warmth, but more on account of the jars that might come from a swift passage over the miles of country road lying between the Bowers farm and the town of Brewster.

"Get in, Miss Bowers, if you're going along," said Phil; "and I'll hand you Annette after you're settled. We've got to run all the car's worth, you know, so as to get him to the doctor in a rush."

"Keep Annette with you on the front seat, please," Miss Bowers told him. "I want to be free to pass my arm around his poor hero of mine, and save him as much as I can from the bumps."

"In with you, Casper; find some place to settle!" cried Phil.

X-Ray sat in front, holding Annette tightly. Ethan, Lub and Casper managed to stow themselves away in the rear, for it happened that the car was a capacious one, and capable of carrying seven passengers comfortably.

"All ready?" demanded Phil, as he cranked up, and then jumped aboard.

"Yep, let her go, Mr. Pilot!" replied Lub,

who had been forced to squat there like a great toad, because there was no room for him on the seat; but just then it was little he cared on account of this, if he could only be in the crowd when they reached the Brewster hospital.

Immediately the car started, and Miss Bowers never even bothered giving a single look back at her house; she was more concerned about the condition of the tramp.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAD RACE AGAINST TIME

"GIVE the old machine her head, Phil!"

"Let her out!"

"Hold on, everybody, or you may get tipped overboard!"

With exclamations after this type was the start of the swift race against time to the hospital made. Phil knew his car as well as he did anything, and he believed it could be depended on in an emergency.

The road was not all that he would have liked when making a hurry run. It not only had poor places where the road superviser had failed to get his gang of road repairers busy; but there were also numerous sudden bends.

In these latter places many an accident had befallen reckless chauffeurs in times gone by. Perhaps they were not familiar with the curves, and failed to handle the guiding wheel with sufficient skill to avoid a bad spill.

Undaunted by the memory of these accidents Phil quickly turned on full power, and the car

fairly burned the road as it dashed headlong toward the distant town of Brewster.

When he approached a bend Phil immediately slowed down somewhat, though still whirling around the curve at what seemed tremendous speed. At least Lub thought as much, as he crouched there, and held on to Ethan's leg, since there was no other support handy. Lub could not see as well as the rest, because he was on the floor of the car, and riding backwards.

"Whee! are we flying?" he was heard to exclaim, as he looked sideways, and saw the trees speeding past in apparently endless procession.

Then as they turned a bend and it seemed to Lub that the car was running on just two wheels he let out a whoop, and they saw him instantly throw his whole weight over on the side that appeared to be rising in the air, not a bad idea for Lub to conceive, either.

Whether his action had anything to do with the matter or not, no one could ever say; but at any rate the speeding car did not turn over, as it had threatened at one time to do.

"That's the ticket, Lub!" called out X-Ray from in front, "every time we go around a bend you be the balance wheel."

But already Lub was beginning to feel dizzy, just as though he had been at sea in a boat, with

the wild waves rising and falling under him. No doubt it came partly from his sitting there and riding backward, so that as he looked out the trees trooped past and affected his vision.

So he determined to change his position, meaning to kneel with his face turned forward.

"Hey! quit pinching me, Lub!" squealed Ethan, as he felt the other's grip suddenly become more intense.

"That's better now!" announced the fat boy when he had twisted around.

"But you've gone and left a black and blue mark, I wager!" complained the indignant Ethan.

Lub made no answer. He had caught another glimpse of the tramp's face while in the act of changing his position, and it gave him a bad feeling.

"Gosh! what if we found he'd dropped off when we got him there to the hospital?" was the dreadful thought that flashed into his mind, and made him tremble all over.

After that Lub could not have spoken immediately again, even though he may have had something of considerable importance to communicate; besides, the wind created by their furious progress took his very breath away.

"Huh! there goes my hat!" he heard X-Ray suddenly call out.

"Let it go till we come back!" advised Ethan, from behind, who had made a swift though ineffectual effort to catch the headgear as it flew past him.

"It's only my old one, anyway!" X-Ray made out to say, consolingly, boy-fashion, and immediately hastily added, "Something coming ahead there I reckon, Phil."

"I see it," was the reply, and instantly the auto horn sent out several hoarse warning blasts.

All of them looked earnestly to discover what the result would be. Sometimes stubborn farmers came along this road with their heavy wagons or empty hayricks, who fancied they were getting even with the chauffeurs of racing cars when they refused to let them pass until they got good and ready.

Then again, as one of the boys had mentioned before, if a great load of hay going to the market in Brewster should be overtaken in a narrow part of the road, such a thing as getting by was utterly out of the question, until some time had elapsed, and a wider place was reached.

Phil earnestly hoped they would not have such a misfortune come upon them. He wanted to make record time in covering the ground be-

tween the Bowers farm and the town of Brewster. There was a reason for haste, since the poor tramp still lay on the back seat, limp and apparently lifeless, so that all of them were more or less alarmed on account of his condition.

"It's a wagon!" called out X-Ray, immediately.

"And coming this way too, which shows it's empty, and can easy give us room to pass by!" added Ethan.

"But he's mighty slow to get to one side, ain't he?" asked Lub, anxiously, as he tried to brace himself against a possible collision should Phil keep rushing on so furiously, and the obstinate "hayseed" absolutely decline to draw aside.

Of course Phil had slackened their pace by now. He was not the one to take unnecessary chances when there was really no need of such a thing. Life was too precious a thing to be played with, Phil always considered, when tempted to be rash, like X-Ray for instance.

"Thank goodness, the old icewagon's moving at last!" said Ethan.

There was an ancient tiller of the soil in the heavy farm wagon. He frowned in an ugly fashion as the car approached under reduced speed. Phil had even to stop short because there was still scant space to squeeze by.

"Give us a little more room, please!" Phil called out, trying not to show the indignation that was boiling within him.

"Jest think ye own the hull airth, don't ye, 'cause ye happens to be in a cyar as cost a mint o' money?" sneered the irascible old farmer; "I hed two hosses killed by 'em so far, and collected damages both times. Willin' to try it agin. Easiest way to sell yer ole stock. Jest wait till I takes my time to edge over, will ye? I'd like to know what ye chasin' down the road like a runaway engine for, thet's what?"

"Don't you see we're hurrying a man to the hospital, you old fool?" roared Lub, who could not hold in any longer for the life of him.

"I'm ashamed of you, Abe Slocum," said Miss Bowers, whom the farmer had evidently not recognized before, if he noticed her presence in the car at all; "this poor fellow has been terribly burned, rescuing my little Annette when my house took fire; and we're trying to save his life by hurrying him to the hospital. Here you are delaying us, and it may cost his life yet. Get out of the road, man, or I'll jump from this car, and turn you out myself!"

Phil believed Miss Bowers would have done it, too. The farmer hastened to back his team. He had received something of a severe jolt, it

could be perceived; and as Phil started off again, the way being clear, he heard Abe Slocum saying to himself over and over:

"Gosh all hemlock! if it ain't so, Abe, ye sinner; I'll never forgive ye fur actin' the hawg in the manger!"

Having succeeded in passing the obstacle that had threatened to bar their further progress they were once more speeding forward with leaps and bounds, as if to make up for lost time.

"Pretty near half-way there already, Phil, ain't we?" called out Ethan, presently, as he recognized some well known land-mark that they were whizzing past.

"I should think so," the pilot told him, never taking his eyes off the road in front; for when going at such a dizzy pace it would be the height of madness to try and look around.

"And so far it's all right!" added X-Ray.

"Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high!" cried Lub, thinking he should have some say in the matter.

"How about Briggs?" asked Phil, shortly.

X-Ray turned around to look for himself.

"Seems to be just the same, Phil," he reported.

"Hasn't come to, then?" questioned the other, uneasily.

"Not so I can tell it, for a fact," said X-Ray.

No more was said just then. Indeed, it was a hard task to talk at all when the wind whistled between one's teeth, and seemed to be trying to throw the words back from whence they came.

"There's a load of hay ahead, Phil, sorry to tell you!" announced X-Ray suddenly, at which Lub cried out:

"Oh! what a pity! Now we will be held up for keeps!"

"Look again, X-Ray," advised the pilot, "seems to me it's coming out of a side road there!"

"Phil, you're right, that's what it's doing. Sound your horn, and give him a jar. P'raps he'll see fit to slow down, and let us get by before he strikes the main road."

"You c'n slip past before he gets to this road, I do believe, Phil!" exclaimed Ethan. "Crowd her for all she can stand, and who cares for expenses. Here we go!"

They were fairly flying now. The driver of the haywagon must see what their object was, and if he stirred up his horses so as to block the road there might be a terrible accident. Perhaps his load would go up in flames and smoke as well, for an overturned automobile is very apt to catch on fire when the gasoline tank explodes.

"He's holding in, all right!" announced X-Ray, in a satisfied tone.

Phil had kept himself in readiness to clamp on the brake if in his judgment the man on the load of hay persisted to crossing their course so as to block them. As they fairly shot past the side road where he awaited them they heard him call out something as though scoring such reckless driving. So Ethan saw fit to raise himself and simply bawl back at him the one suggestive word:

"Hospital!"

If the man had any sense at all he must surely understand that there was a method in their madness. They quite forgot all about him as soon as the danger was of the past. It was enough to keep watching the road in front, so as to learn of any new peril that might menace them.

Some of those boys might have enjoyed speeding over the road at a lively pace in times gone by, but they would never forget that ride as long as they lived. There was Phil Bradley at the wheel, and that senseless hobo partly supported by the tender arm of Miss Bowers, herself burned slightly in half a dozen places, yet never giving her pains the least thought.

"I can see the Baptist Church steeple now,"

announced X-Ray, just as though he had been stationed there on the front seat in order to play the part of a human field-glass, and report his discoveries, whether pleasant or otherwise.

"That means only another mile, then," said Phil, who knew all about distances in the vicinity of Brewster town.

"A buggy on the road!" called out X-Ray; "yes, and a car coming this way, in the bargain. Better slow down some, hadn't we, Phil?"

The pilot had already done this, for he knew that it would be impossible to safely maintain this mad pace right to the door of the hospital.

"How long have we been in coming, d'ye reckon?" asked Lub, as with moderated speed they entered the outskirts of the town, with Phil aiming to fetch up in the side street where the white building with wings stood, known far and wide as Brewster Hospital.

"Not over ten minutes actual running time, I should say," replied X-Ray, who was always reckoned a clever hand at computing sums, and could be depended on to get things pretty close to the facts.

"And it must be all of ten miles to Miss Bowers' farm, wouldn't you say?" continued Lub, as though startled at the thought of having flown so fast.

"All of that as the crow flies," observed the owner of the farm; "so it must be a whole lot more by the crooked road. I never went so fast in all my life, and at that I've done considerable traveling on the railroads."

"Well, here we are at the hospital," said Phil.

"But Briggs hasn't come out of that swoon yet, has he?" remarked X-Ray, uneasily.

"Sorry to say he hasn't," replied Ethan; "but people often remain unconscious for hours at a time. I only hope Doc Whittaker is at the hospital around this time."

"Wait a minute, Phil," said Miss Bowers; "for there's the Doctor right now. I might beckon to him to come over here, and then he can send for attendants with a stretcher to carry the poor fellow in."

She jumped up and began to wave her hand, at the same time calling out loudly:

"Doctor, you're wanted over here!"

The large, gray-bearded gentleman with an important business-like air stared at them as though wondering what was meant. Then he appeared to recognize Miss Bowers in spite of her rather strange appearance, for he immediately started toward the group beside the big touring car.

CHAPTER XV

A WONDERFUL DISCOVERY

DOCTOR WHITTAKER was by long odds the best known and most popular physician in all Brewster and vicinity.

There was a time when the doctor possessed a boy whom both he and his good wife loved deeply; but they had lost him. Ever since that time their hearts had been sore; while their tender regard for all young people had increased rather than diminished.

Doctor Whittaker looked at the group.

"What does all this mean, Miss Bowers; and how is it you and Annette are here so far from home this afternoon?" he asked.

"Now you're wondering if Annette is ill, Doctor," Miss Bowers started to say; "but I'm glad it's nothing like that. And yet Heaven only knows what might have happened to her only for the bravery of a poor young homeless tramp who rushed into my burning house and carried her out, wrapped in a sofa cover."

"You astound me, Miss Bowers!" exclaimed

the doctor; "do you mean that your house has burned down?"

"Not quite so bad as that, thanks to these gallant boys. But, Doctor, we've fetched my hero tramp to the hospital to be taken care of."

"He must be carried in at once," he remarked.

So the still senseless Briggs was gently lifted from the car and borne inside.

The first thing the nurse did was to fetch a basin of warm water, soap, and a towel.

"Why, he's really human!" muttered Lub, to Ethan, as he too glimpsed the face of the tramp, which was pretty white just then—at least it had no color in it.

The doctor now came forward, and proceeded to examine the various burns on the tramp.

Miss Bowers was watching and waiting with more or less anxiety. What the tramp had done for Annette had won her whole heart, and she really looked upon him as a genuine hero. If he lost his life through that gallant act Miss Bowers would mourn as sincerely for him as though he were kith and kin to her.

The doctor looked up, just as though he knew she must be hanging on his verdict.

"What do you say, Doctor?" she asked him, her voice quivering more or less.

"He is badly burned," the physician replied,

gravely; "fortunately the injuries seem to be confined to his arms and torso. I am in great hopes we can pull him through in good time; if only he has not inhaled the fire."

"I asked him that the first thing, Doctor," spoke up Phil; and the other halted as he was about to bend over and look for himself, to say:

"And what was his answer, Phil?"

"He assured me he knew the penalty that would follow such a foolish action, and had kept his mouth closed. His eyebrows are gone, and his hair singed, but I think that is the worst that happened to his face. He must have lowered his head when passing through the flames."

"I am glad to hear that, Phil; for it gives him a better chance. He is showing signs of recovering consciousness, and so I had better look for myself before—"

Doctor Whittaker failed to complete his sentence. Phil saw him stand there bending over the poor tramp. He appeared to have been transfixed, and his eyes were staring at the face of Briggs. Evidently up to that moment he had taken only a cursory glance at the features, and with eyebrows gone and his hair ditto possibly Briggs' late camp-mate up there along the road would never have recognized him unless he looked very closely.

Then Doctor Whittaker bent down, and placed a hand on the forehead of the tramp. Phil noticed that the movement was unusually tender. As the physician looked hastily up there was an expression of supreme wonder on his face.

"This is next door to a miracle, Miss Bowers!" he said, in an awed tone.

"Why, what do you mean, Doctor?" she demanded.

"Your hero tramp, the boy who saved little Annette from death, and came near sacrificing his own life in so doing, is Elmer Whittaker!"

"Whew!" almost whistled X-Ray Tyson, as the immensity of the discovery burst upon him.

"Your nephew, do you mean, Doctor?" gasped Miss Bowers, evidently thrilled by the astounding nature of the discovery that had just been made.

"There is no doubt of it," said the physician, gravely, and yet with a ring of growing satisfaction and pride in his voice. "There, he is opening his eyes now, and will be able to speak for himself."

They crowded around, every eye fixed on the face of Briggs, the tramp. Just as the doctor had said he was fast recovering his con-

sciousness; and even as they looked they saw his eyes come open.

His eyes roved from face to face—first that of Phil, then Lub, Ethan, X-Ray, Miss Bowers and finally little Annette. No real sign of recognition seemed to glow there until the little girl's wondering face was reached, and then Briggs smiled wanly.

"Then she is safe?" he said, in a sort of satisfied way; "I was afraid I had made a bad job of it, and that she was hurt; but it's all right, it's all right."

"Yes, she wasn't injured a particle, Elmer!" said Doctor Whittaker.

At the sound of his voice the eyes of the tramp quickly turned toward the physician, who immediately bent over him. There was an expression of pain spreading over the face of the tramp, but it was mental, not physical.

"Oh! Uncle Amos," he said, weakly, while the tears welled up in his eyes; "I am ashamed to face you again, because I've proved a failure in everything I tried. I have been utterly discouraged, and sick in soul and body. When I saw the way things seemed going I made up my mind to come back home, just to die here."

"Well, my boy," said the doctor, "instead of that you've come back home to live. You've

learned your lesson through the hard road of bitter experience; and what you did this day in risking your life for an unknown child proves that your heart has not been spoiled, at least. The body we'll mend presently, and start you off on a new and splendid future that opens up before you. Everything is forgiven, my son. Home and mother will be waiting for you when you leave this hospital."

"Oh! Uncle Amos, I don't deserve it!" cried the tramp, fondling the strong hand of the doctor, which closed over his firmly.

"You deserve the best that can come to you!" cried Miss Bowers; "and to think that the sweet child you bore through those flames should be my Annette, who is so dear to the hearts of Doctor Whittaker and his good wife. You are my hero, Elmer."

With that the old maid stooped down and kissed Briggs squarely on the mouth.

As for the Mountain Boys, they could not say a single word just then. The startling developments of the last few minutes had taken the power of speech entirely out of their control.

Phil looked at each of his chums in turn, and seemed to be holding his breath, as were Lub, Ethan, and even X-Ray, which was a wonder-

ful event with regard to the last mentioned, since few persons had ever known X-Ray Tyson to lose his ability to talk.

"We'll leave all explanations go until I have properly treated my patient," the doctor now told them; "and so the rest of you will have to go into the reception room to wait for me. I want to know every minute particular, remember."

There was no going against this dismissal, and so Miss Bowers, Annette, Casper and the four chums retired to the apartment where they could make themselves comfortable while waiting for the coming of the physician.

They had much to talk about, as can be easily understood. Once their tongues were loosened there was a constant Babel of questions and answers.

"It beats anything that ever happened to us, that's dead sure!" vowed Ethan.

"Most wonderful event I ever heard about or read," Lub insisted; "just think how it turns out with the tramp who played the limelight act, and saved the child, proving to be the Prodigal Son of the story, coming home to be forgiven and die!"

"Yes," added X-Ray, "but there's still something more that's wonderful about it all, I think."

"What's that?" demanded Lub; while Phil and Miss Bowers listened with interest.

"The remarkable fact that of all little girls in this county the one Elmer chanced to save should turn out to be Annette, the very one Doctor Whittaker and his wife love so much."

"It looks like an act of Providence to me," said Miss Bowers, solemnly.

"But it's going to be the finest thing ever for Elmer, I'm glad to say," Ethan affirmed. "Just shows what a minute can do to change things around. An hour ago and there he was camping on the road, desperate, sick and without hope. Now he's once more firmly installed in the affection of his uncle, going to be his adopted son, and his future looks rosy."

"If he pulls through, that means," said X-Ray.

"Oh! there isn't going to be any doubt about that!" declared Miss Bowers, confidently. "Doctor Whittaker will do wonders for him; and then again, the joy that has come upon poor Elmer will help him get well. There's nothing like happiness and a contented mind to take one over a sick spell."

"We all hope it will come out that way," said Phil; "and for one I believe Miss Bowers is right when she says that. If there's anything I can

do, even to giving up square inches of skin off my leg to help out, I'll be glad to offer my services."

"Same here!" sang out Lub, to every one's surprise.

"Oh! from the four of us the doctor'd be able to graft enough to cover even the widest burn!" declared Ethan, carelessly, as though making such a little sacrifice did not amount to much after all.

"All I can say!" cried Miss Bowers, with considerable emotion, "is that it seems to me I have made the acquaintance of a set of the manliest boys it has ever been my good fortune to meet; and I'll never forget this wonderful day as long as I live. And here is little Casper Bunce waiting to be cared for. Just as soon as we leave the hospital we must go around to the office of the judge, where the legal steps can be taken to sever his relations with that miserable farmer, Wolfgang Smith. Then after I've managed to secure some decent apparel, I mean to go with him in his new clothes to get my school-girl friend Susie Bunce from the poor-house, so we can all go back home together, to be one happy family."

"Bully! bully! bully!" exclaimed Ethan; and although his manner of expressing the state of

his feelings was a little tempestuous and boyish, even Miss Bowers could understand what he meant, and her heart was singing the same song of thanksgiving as she looked proudly around at the Mountain Boys.

CHAPTER XVI

A GLORIOUS PROSPECT—CONCLUSION

FINALLY came the doctor. It needed only a glance at his smiling face to assure the deeply anxious Miss Bowers that all was going well.

"I am glad to say," he told them immediately, so as to relieve their suspense, "that the boy will surely get well. It may be necessary to do a little grafting of skin, but so far as I can see now there is nothing serious about the state of his health."

"Then his fear that he was doomed to die doesn't mean he has some malady that would take him off?" asked Miss Bowers, with a sigh of relief.

"I do not think so," the physician told her, positively. "His distress of mind had a great deal to do with his imagining that he was in a decline. But now he is feeling so happy there's no doubt about his ultimate recovery."

He turned to Phil and the others, to continue:

"And I want to thank you, every one, from

the bottom of my heart, for bringing me such happiness this day. My wife and I have mourned over Elmer, for we had learned to love him. He has confessed everything to me, and I believe him. It was only an exuberance of boyish foolishness, after all. He has a bitter lesson, and I feel the lad will be a better man for it all."

Then Miss Bowers went on to tell him about Casper, and the cruel farmer to whom he had been bound out.

"I'll go right around with you all to the office of the judge, who is a particular friend of mine," said Doctor Whittaker; "and we'll break those legal bonds in no time. And let me say, Miss Bowers, your idea about Casper and his mother does your heart credit. They will be of great comfort to you. I told you it was a bad thing for you to be living to yourself so much."

"This day I will write down as the red letter day of my life," she told him, joyously, as they went out of the hospital, to start for the office of the judge; "for it seems as though I am overwhelmed with favors from every side."

Her arm was around the figure of Casper as she sat in Phil's car, and the bound boy, looking up into her smiling, cheery face, took comfort, since he knew that for him too it had

been the greatest day that could ever happen.

The judge was in, and received them all warmly. He listened to the story with a vast amount of interest, for although possessed of a stupendous legal brain he was nevertheless a man for all that, and had boys and girls of his own at home.

"I confess that I never listened to a more interesting story," he told them, at the conclusion; "and as for Casper here, it will be no trouble at all to dissolve the agreement whereby he was bound out to Wolfgang Smith, whom I thought a decent sort of man."

At that Miss Bowers bade the boy remove his tattered jacket, and show his poor bruised body. The judge was horrified at the revelation.

"The brute!" he said, angrily, "he shall be proceeded against for that if there is a law in the land. I am a judge, and perhaps shouldn't say it, but I am also a father; and if I heard that some neighbors had taken Wolfgang Smith out of his house at night, and administered twenty stripes to his bare back, I'd go into my closet where no one could hear me, and whisper to myself 'served him right!' "

After that Miss Bowers carried Casper away with her. Phil promised to be around again in

an hour with the car and his chums, so as to take the couple away once more.

When the Mountain Boys did arrive they hardly knew either Miss Bowers or the neat looking lad by her side; for while the old maid had purchased a new gown to replace that which the fire and water had ruined, Casper was clad from head to foot in the best garments, hat, and shoes that the town outfitter could supply.

"I guess if that old curmudgeon Smith should meet Casper face to face on the road now," ventured Ethan, with a wide grin, "he'd take off his hat to him, and pass the time of day, thinking he must be the son of the banker."

That seemed to please Casper exceedingly; for boylike he must have often—when sent to bed supperless by his hard task-master—tried to imagine a day of revenge coming, when he should have reached the pinnacle of success, and caused his flinty-hearted guardian to bow down to his superior ability and wealth.

Once more they were headed for the Bowers farm, by way of the poor-house. At this latter place another affecting scene took place, when Mrs. Bunce, being brought down to the sitting-room, was amazed when a finely dressed and manly looking boy rushed over to her, and clasped his arms vigorously around her neck.

At first she was naturally somewhat dazed, and it required some explanations from Miss Bowers before she began to understand that Fortune had indeed wearied of buffeting her about, and that a bright future was opening the door beyond.

It did not take long for her to gather her scanty possessions in a bundle; and when Phil once more took to the road the car had another occupant; with the radiant Casper sitting between his mother and his "guardian angel," as he was likely to believe Miss Bowers.

It looked a bit dismal up at the farm, with all those evidences of a recent conflagration present. But Miss Bowers never minded these things a bit.

"Why should I worry about a little damage like this, covered by insurance too; when it has brought about such wonderful things for most of us?" she told them, as having carefully changed her new gown for one that was more suitable to work in, she started to hustle around, and get things in some sort of decent shape.

It would be a week perhaps before the kitchen would look anything like the old one again; but meanwhile she knew how to adopt a makeshift, and there would be no lack of hearty meals under that hospitable roof.

Having seen the little family installed, and done all Miss Bowers would allow them to attempt, in order to clean up some of the mess, Phil and his chums finally remembered that they still had a job on their hands.

"We've got to load up those eight sacks of nuts, and get them to town before dark comes on," the leader told them.

"Everybody jump aboard and we'll back up again," announced X-Ray, who liked to play the part of master of ceremonies once in a while.

The section of fence had been pretty well taken down at the time they heard the alarm from the burning farmhouse; so it did not take long to complete this part of their task. Then the stout planks having been carefully placed over the small bed of the creek, Phil guided the car over, and managed to back it to the very edge of the great hickory grove.

They saw nothing more of their friends the 'coons, who may have been slily watching the intruders from some new covert, for all the boys knew.

Then the heavy sacks of nuts were carried to the car and loaded. As there were so many it required considerable skill to get the cargo properly adjusted. Here it was that the rope again came in very handy, since they were compelled

to make use of it in order to secure the upper bags, so they would not fall off.

Phil asked the boys to walk down to the house. If there was going to be any danger of a spill, or the planks of the bridge giving way under the heavy weight of the car, he did not want them aboard.

But nothing happened to disturb their plans, for Phil was a careful chauffeur. The boys repaired the section of fence, and under Phil's directions even replaced the borrowed planks where they had found them.

Stopping for a few minutes at the house to see if there was anything they could do they found that Casper had been given some work garments which had been bought for him, and was now as busy as a beaver.

"I bet you," said Ethan as they came up, and caught Casper pounding away at a rude table he was making to serve them temporarily, "that's the first whistle he's had the heart to let out for many a long day."

"And don't he look happy, though?" added Lub, himself feeling as though he were bubbling over with joy, because all things were working together for good.

So they left the Bowers family, and the last they saw of them Casper, Annette and the

buxom owner of the farm were waving their hands fondly after them.

The splendid store of nuts was safely delivered at the orphan asylum, and the boys thanked again by Mrs. Jones, the matron.

"If you could but know," she said to Phil and his three chums, "what comfort and pleasure you've given these children for the whole long winter, by your kind action of to-day, you'd think it was the best thing you ever attempted."

It turned out that while the burns Elmer Whittaker had received were severe, under the care of his uncle they gradually mended, and no skin grafting was necessary.

He recovered, and manifesting a great desire to follow in the footsteps of his benefactor, started in to study medicine.

Casper Bunce was easily taken from the charge of Farmer Smith, who would have been proceeded against by the judge only that Mrs. Bunce objected. She was so happy over the wonderful change in her own fortunes that she felt as though they must not bear malice.

Phil and the others did not stay long enough in and around Brewster to see all these things happening. The fall had come, and with school closed probably until after New Year's, the Mountain Boys had a plan of campaign ar-

ranged that was going to carry them far afield, and bring them in contact with possible new and interesting adventures.

First of all Phil had arranged that they should go with him down to the coast in North Carolina, to visit that wonderful ducking place on Currituck Sound, where oysters, diamond-back terrapin, fish of all kinds, ducks, geese and brant abound; and put in a week or two with him there.

Consent had been easily obtained on the part of various mothers and fathers, for they had the greatest confidence in Phil Bradley, and knew that so long as their sons were in his company they were not likely to come to any harm.

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